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Monster Tamer 3

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Chapter 1: Protection and Guidance

Two months had passed since the students and staff of my high school, a total of over one thousand people, were all mass teleported to another world. After realizing I possessed what we called a cheat—abilities inherent to those teleported here—one that allowed me to make allies of monsters, I worked together with my servants, starting with the mimic slime Lily, to survive in this rigorous world.

We followed the lead of my servant Gerbera, who had once witnessed an armed force of humans long ago, and journeyed north. Four days ago, we found traces of human activity. By following the small path through the forest, we finally discovered the humans of this world. We observed them from a hidden position, but they detected us before we could make a move. Right before steeling myself to meet them face-to-face, the schoolgirl I had been protecting, Katou Mana, unexpectedly collapsed. I left her behind in the care of my servants, the magical puppet Rose and the white arachne Gerbera, then went ahead to make contact with the people of this world.

The first local I spoke to was an elf with pointy ears peeking out through her splendid blonde hair. Not only that, she was a girl who looked around my age. I never even dreamed of the possibility.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir. My name is Shiran. I serve as the lieutenant for this company of knights.”

She wore armor over her entire body, except for her white helmet which she held under her arm as she quickly bowed her head. Her mannerisms exuded precision, like she was in full control of her every nerve right down to the tips of her fingers. These were likely the movements of a soldier, or in her words, those of a knight.

A yellow sphere floated in the air above her. It was like some sort of mysterious creature molded from clay, with little limbs protruding from it. What looked like a cloth cape fluttered about as it slowly rotated on the spot.

Following Shiran's lead, the other twenty or so knights removed their helmets. Apparently, not all the people of this world were elves. Only three others had pointy ears. Incidentally, nobody else had a strange floating creature with them.

Over ten boys and girls were huddled together behind the knights, all wearing the same uniform I had on myself. I was curious why they were together, but right now it was better to focus on my conversation with the girl before me.

Shiran raised her head and met my gaze. Her clear and straightforward blue eyes left quite the impression.

"May I presume you are visitors from afar, come from another world?"

Her phrasing seemed overly formal. I wasn't sure whether this was just part of her personality or a peculiarity of the people of this world. In any case, she wasn't wrong.

"It's just as you say. It seems you're accompanying people from my world already, so I assume you already know of our circumstances?"

"That we do, sir. You've done well to stay safe all this time."

Her words contained a sense of relief which she made no indication of concealing. If this wasn't just for show, then she didn't seem to bear us any ill will. On the contrary, she actually looked delighted to find myself and Mizushima Miho safe—setting aside that this was actually my servant Lily mimicking that girl's appearance.

"You two must have gone through a terrible experience. We are currently in the process of guiding your brethren to a safe location. If you have no objections, would you like to accompany us to the region we inhabit?"

"I couldn't ask for more, but..."

I hesitated for a moment. I had already planned to ask them to guide us to a human settlement. Their offering like this was far more convenient than anything I could think of, almost to the point it sat poorly with me.

"Is it really alright to bring complete strangers like us to your home?"

Common sense dictated that people who claimed they were from another

world were definitely insane. I didn't know what passed for common sense here, but even if people teleporting in from other worlds was a common phenomenon, we were both foreigners and aliens. We were people they should've been wary of. That was why I suspected there was something behind this.

But Shiran's attitude was the very definition of sincere. "Of course we don't mind," she answered, the air about her implying this was perfectly natural. "You visitors from afar are guests of honor, after all."

"Guests of honor...?"

The phrase sent a chill down my spine for some reason. It wasn't like I sensed any malice behind her words. Shiran was facing me with pure sincerity. At the very least, my eyes couldn't spot anything suspicious in her behavior. This unpleasant feeling running through me, however, was based on something far more logical.

For example, I thought of myself as an invader in this world. Yet here she was, saying I was a guest of honor. Our cognition was slightly misaligned. It felt like our dialogue wasn't meshing properly. It was easy to brush this off as a result of being from different worlds. But it was disconcerting for me not to have a full grasp on the situation I found myself in. It was too dangerous. Even if the circumstances were convenient for us, it was terrifying that I couldn't predict how things would unfold.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant Shiran. What do you mean by 'guests of honor'?"

"I mean..."

Just as she began to answer my question, Shiran came to a sudden realization and stopped.

Crap... I rushed the conversation too much without meaning to.

I wanted to click my tongue at my own impatience. But fortunately, Shiran didn't seem to find anything out of place in what I said.

"My apologies, Takahiro. Before speaking of such matters, we must get moving. Staying in one place for too long is fatal within the Woodlands." With that, Shiran tapped her heels together and lowered her head. "I am sure you

must be anxious with everything still unanswered. However, could you come with us first? We will arrive at our destination shortly. Please wait until then for any further explanations.”

“...Understood.”

There was no need for me to get my answers right away. I decided to shelve my unease for the moment and accept her request.

Unaware of the thoughts going through my mind, Shiran let out a sigh of relief and put her white helmet back on. “Then please come this way, sir, madam. We welcome your company,” she said as the mysterious creature fluttered about above her head.

Now that I thought of it, I’d missed my chance to ask her what it was. I made sure to remind myself to ask if the opportunity arose.



After our quick introductions, we began moving out of the clearing. The armored knights split into two groups, one in front of the students and one behind. The knights’ leader, Shiran, was in the back of the group to the front, giving orders to the entire formation as we walked down the forest path.

Including Lily and me, there were fifteen students total. The others were apparently all from separate groups that the knights had gathered together one after the other. Thanks to that, it wasn’t strange for us to join in.

“You’ve been wandering around this forest all this time? I’m surprised you survived.”

“It’s okay now.”

“These guys will protect us. We’re saved.”

“I was really wondering what was going to happen to us for a while. It’s such a relief.”

“Oh hey, it’s Mizushima! Thank goodness you’re okay!”

The somewhat haggard-looking students greeted us with a warm welcome. We only had enough time to exchange names before departing, so I didn’t have a grasp of all their personalities yet, but there were some I managed to

remember.

One was a boy who seemed to be a year older than me named Miyoshi Taichi. His original group was composed of two other boys and one girl, but he spoke to everyone equally. To put it simply, he was something like a class peacemaker. One of the people in his group actually was his former classmate too.

Another was a boy who stood out because he left a bad impression. His name was Sakagami Gouta, and he was one year younger than me. He didn't even tell me his own name. It was actually Miyoshi who introduced him with a somewhat bitter expression. In short, Sakagami Gouta was a delinquent. He ruffled his dirty, bleached hair in displeasure as he shot daggers at everyone around him. Such behavior segregated him from the group. That was fine in times of peace, but in a situation like this, it was fatal. He didn't look like he had such a hardy nature that he didn't care about that, but...

As I casually observed him, I noticed Sakagami glancing over at Lily every once in a while. It didn't need to be said why he had a lecherous smile on his face. Lily's mimicry of Mizushima Miho put her a step above everyone in this group in terms of beauty.

There was one other person in Sakagami's group. He was a timid-looking schoolboy who appeared to be carrying Sakagami's stuff, judging from the large backpack he wore and his unsteady steps. Even here, people oppressed each other and let such irrationalities by.

Miyoshi and the other students' displeasure toward Sakagami was very clear through their expressions, gazes, and behavior. I could understand how they felt. I didn't like watching him either.

Seeing them like this naturally brought back memories of our school life before coming to this world. That felt like ages ago now. The students here came from every grade, and we were in the middle of a forest, but this scene was entirely commonplace in classrooms all across Japan. Considering our situation, where the entire school was teleported, perhaps it was natural for such a scene to manifest, but...

"Majima, Mizushima, are you two getting tired?" Miyoshi asked.

“No, I’m okay. Thanks for asking,” I replied.

“How about you, Miyoshi? Isn’t this somewhat tiring for you?” Lily asked.

“Haha. Didn’t think a girl would worry about me. I may not look it, but I was part of the track and field club. My specialty was long-distance running, too. I won’t tire out all that easily.”

We struck up conversations like this every now and then to encourage each other onward, but we mostly walked down the forest path in silence. The general exhaustion of the group was largely responsible for the lack of chatter. The other reason was that chatting away mindlessly while walking through this forest was simply a bad idea. Even a small child could tell that being too noisy was liable to attract monsters.

“...”

I felt something out of place as I walked in silence among the students. Something was off. I couldn’t shake that feeling. It was essentially the same as the discrepancy in cognition I felt when I was speaking with Shiran.

I more or less felt like a complete outsider in this world. It didn’t need to be said that I was an outsider in this group. As proof of that, Lily had been nestled up by my side ever since we joined in. I didn’t know how this looked to the others—although I could largely guess from the envious gazes I felt every now and then—but in truth, her close proximity to me was that of a guard and her charge. This was a precaution against the ones we were accompanying.

So, this did in fact make me an outsider, but...it couldn’t possibly be the source of my discomfort. Something else felt out of place. I still couldn’t tell what it was though.

“*Majima?*”

Lily gripped my hand as I immersed myself in thought. Her considerate gaze was wholeheartedly focused on me. Other gazes also gathered on me, but I didn’t care about those.

“Are you okay, *Majima?*”

I was hiding my ability from the people of this world, as well as the students,

just in case. That was why Lily referred to me by name instead of “Master.” She was acting as Mizushima Miho. But that didn’t change our relationship.

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

At the very least, she was the only one who was standing in the same place as me. That conviction allowed me to suppress my unease and continue marching.

Our group eventually began ascending a gentle slope. As we went up this hill in the forest, our field of vision suddenly opened up considerably. Several cheers broke out in joy. The forest had been dominating our view this entire time. And now it was gone. In its stead was a sturdy-looking stone building. An enormous fortress with walls weathered by long years towered before us, cutting a hole in the dense forest.



Chapter 2: The Large Inconsistency Between Here and There

A fortress lay within the dense forest. The impression it gave could be summed up in one word: sturdy. The long years of wear and tear showed on its stony walls. Time gave its surface a different quality from the materials it was originally made from. We were only looking at its exterior, and a single portion of it at that, yet it was enough for us to see it as simply enormous.

I was completely under the impression they were going to bring us to a village or town or something. But after giving it some thought, there was no way a village or town could exist within this dangerous forest. The people here were surely unable to survive without sealing themselves within a sturdy box built with hundreds upon thousands of stones.

“My dear visitors from afar. Here lies Fort Tilia,” Shiran said, her stern expression now colored with relief. “You may feel at ease now. We knights clear the surroundings of monsters at regular intervals. Everyone within the fortress should be ready to welcome you. I’m sure your fellow visitor is also eagerly awaiting your arrival. Come now, let us move. Fort Tilia is but a few more steps away.”

The group started walking once more. Their footsteps were light.

“So, there are other visitors from our world in the fortress?” I asked Shiran, taking advantage of the students’ excited chatter.

“Yes. There is one other fortunate soul who made it through the forest, much like you have, sir,” Shiran replied as a shadow hung over her. “Unfortunate as it is, he was the only one capable of getting through the Woodlands using his own strength, aside from the two of you.”

“Just one aside from Mizushima and me...? Aren’t there many visitors here in the same circumstances as us?” I asked, taking a look at the other students walking in a festive mood. If Shiran was correct, what did it make them?

“Unlike you, they did not make it through the forest using their own strength.”

“So, how...?”

“There are multiple listening posts built throughout the forest to gather information for Fort Tilia on the Woodlands. Your brethren had secluded themselves in such places. We of the Third Company gathered them by patrolling four such listening posts and brought them here in the process.”

“...I see.”

I did find it pretty strange before hearing this. Rampaging cheaters had destroyed the Colony, our temporary housing here in the forest. At that point, around eight hundred students were living there. So, how many of them had managed to get out of the Colony alive? A hundred? Two? Or maybe even double that?

In any case, after escaping the living hell in the Colony, what awaited them was an entirely different form of hell—a forest rampant with monsters. That was precisely my experience; there was no mistaking it. In fact, I would’ve been long dead had I not met Lily.

Setting aside irregular cases like mine, it wouldn’t have been strange if all the survivors had been absolutely annihilated. This was why I was quite surprised the knights managed to find so many students. More to the point, there were too many of them here for them all to be students who had wandered aimlessly through the forest without dying.

“But it truly is astonishing. It goes to show that one can never know what might happen,” Shiran added in an earnest tone. “The listening posts I mentioned were designed to be resting areas used by our knights when patrolling the Depths. They look like nothing more than small huts.”

“...”

“They are all furnished with valuable barrier runestones, created using the most sophisticated magic technology, so monsters cannot approach. Your brethren here managed to survive by taking shelter within. You never know what can come in use.”

I sank into an unintentional silence. I recalled the hut where I'd first met Katou, the one I'd spent a single night in. It apparently belonged to these knights. The "barrier runestone" she mentioned was likely the mysterious stone that had prevented Lily and Rose from approaching the hut. I'd ended up destroying it so that the two of them could come in.

As I recalled such details, I suddenly realized something quite bad. "Is this fortress also equipped with these barrier runestones?"

It was entirely possible that Lily, who was walking beside me, Ayame, who was hiding within Lily's body, and Asarina, who was bound beneath the bandage on my arm, wouldn't be able to get into the fortress. This had me secretly panicking, but fortunately, my fears were immediately dispersed.

"No sir. Fort Tilia has no such runestones. The effective range of a barrier runestone is rather limited. It only creates a bubble about the size of a small hut. Although it's theoretically possible, we lack the resources to cover the entire fortress."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Barrier runestones are a precious commodity, and the production method has long been lost, after all. Furthermore, their effects are limited. They can do no more than keep monsters at a distance. They do not completely obstruct their intrusion. There are also far too many conditions for setting one up. We are unable to use them here. There is nothing to fear, of course. There are over a thousand soldiers stationed in the fortress."

"Is that so? That's a relief."

I gave a noncommittal response as a wave of relief washed over me. This was good news. It sounded like barrier runestones would be quite the rarity from now on.

Having managed to regain my composure, I took a look at the other students walking along in a festive mood. "But... You never know what might happen, huh? It really is just as you say," I said, repeating Shiran's own words with a sigh. "So, they were extremely lucky."

"What do you mean by that, sir?"

“I mean, according to what you just said, not only did they come across these protected huts through sheer coincidence, they were also coincidentally saved by your knights. Isn’t that amazing luck?”

In a sense, it was somewhat similar to my own circumstances. After the fall of the Colony, I walked through the forest with both my body and heart in a mess until I finally arrived at that cave. I nearly died there, but I was still standing here today because my feelings reached Lily and brought her to me. Perhaps I felt sympathy for the students walking around me.

“No, that’s not quite right,” Shiran said, denying my train of thought. “It was no coincidence. The reason we made our way to those huts in the Depths was because we were requested to look for possible survivors within them.”

“You were requested to? What exactly does that...?”

Shiran’s statement threw me off completely. This wasn’t Earth. It wasn’t the country we came from. Finding and taking these students under their protection by coincidence was one thing, but there was no way they would do so on purpose. They shouldn’t have gone out of their way to rescue them. None of them had any obligation to completely alien strangers to brave this dangerous forest. Who exactly could have made such a request to begin with?

My mind dove into a torrent of questions as a great cheer broke out around me. Ahead of us, a deep moat surrounding the enormous fortress and the drawbridge which led to its sturdy gates were now in sight. We had managed to reach the fortress while I was speaking with Shiran.

The trees around Fort Tilia were cut down by human hands. The greenery that had been dominating my vision to the left and right were now gone. The sky spread out vast and wide. It felt like we were liberated from some kind of invisible oppression that had been coiling around us.

This was human territory. We could feel it in our skin. Unfortunately, it wasn’t a reason for me to drop my guard. I could see dozens of knights standing in the distance across the drawbridge awaiting our arrival. Among them were several students in uniforms.

I thought she said only one student reached the fortress?

Just as I was about to question her regarding this discrepancy, I noticed Shiran had come to a complete stop.

“Lieutenant?”

“...Impossible.”

I turned around after taking a step past Shiran when she suddenly looked up at the sky. Right above her was a flickering yellow light. Even as we walked, the mysterious creature floated above her. Now it was flailing its short limbs while rotating energetically. It was like it was trying to tell us something, but unfortunately, I had no idea what. Shiran, on the other hand, knew exactly what it was saying.

“Third Company! To arms!”

Her warning pierced through the forest. The situation developed before anyone could ask what was going on. In the next instant, the trees we’d just passed through cracked and fell over as enormous green caterpillars revealed themselves.

“Uwaaah?!”

“Eeek!”

They were large monsters, more than three meters in length, and five of them at that. Their mandibles chattered as they charged toward us. The students screamed while the knights drew their swords in a hurry.

“Wh-Why are there so many bull wrigglers this close to the fortress...?!” one of the knights yelled in agitation. Shiran had just mentioned that they cleared out the monsters around the fortress on a regular basis. It probably wasn’t common to encounter so many monsters around here at once.

I drew the wooden sword at my waist. This was basically a reflex for me at this point. I also decided I didn’t have the time to get my shield out as I exchanged glances with Lily. The first thing we had to do was confirm the situation around us.

As I began to take a look around with that intent...I was left completely dumbstruck.

“...Huh?”

All of the students around us were panicking. Some tried to run away to the fortress right before their eyes without taking a proper look around them. They bumped into each other, and some fell to the ground. This reaction was still on the better side of things though. There were those who intentionally pushed down any who blocked their path, those who fell to their knees in fear, those who clung to the nearby knights... There was even an idiot who kicked down the person beside them to try and ensure their own escape.

This chaos prevented us from attempting an escape of our own. But above all else, it was a complete obstruction to the knights' ability to fight. Panic was contagious. The knights were now becoming restless. This uproar wasn't just a matter of holding them back; it was practically suicide.

What the hell is this...? Did these guys really survive until now like this? According to Shiran, they didn't get through the forest by their own strength. They hid themselves in huts and stayed put until her knights saved them. However, these students were supposed to have at least survived the destruction of the Colony. They had to have escaped from that hell before taking refuge in a safe location. So why...?

“Do not falter!” Shiran yelled, rebuking her subordinates. She was the only one to maintain her composure. There was a sense of bitterness in her voice. She knew how bad this situation was. “Harden the line! They're coming!”

The bull wrigglers charged in, their mandibles chittering all the while. They really did look like big caterpillars. They looked sluggish, but their movements were anything but. On the contrary, they were like charging bulls.

After Shiran's command brought them back to their senses, the knights just barely managed to get into formation. They quickly raised their shields to become a wall for the students. But their backs looked ever so unreliable in my eyes. Could they really obstruct the charge like this? I watched attentively as anxiety filled my heart.

The moment before the bull wrigglers collided with the armored knights...

“Leave them to me.”

A refreshing voice brushed against my ear. And by that time, everything was over.

“Wha—?!”

The bull wrigglers were blown away in the opposite direction. Their bodies were torn to shreds, scattering green bodily fluids to the winds as I watched in a daze. Before I knew it, the battle was over. All I saw was the conclusion, as if time had jumped. My mind couldn't keep up with what happened. But the one thing that was clear to me here was the identity of the one responsible for this.

With a tap, a girl in a blazer, who had neither shape nor shadow just a moment ago, landed on the ground.

“It's alright now.”

Her glamorous waist-length black hair fluttered in the wind as she turned toward us with a smile. It was a warm smile. One which could blow away the anxieties of any who looked upon it.



Everyone held their breath at the girl's sudden arrival. I was no exception. On the contrary, I might've been the most shocked of them all. She had a slender and delicate-looking sword in her grip. This was surely what had torn those five bull wrigglers into shreds. But that was only my conjecture. Even though it had happened right before my eyes, I didn't actually see a single one of her strikes. It was unbelievable.

I had gained the ability to elevate my athleticism using mana. This also amplified my senses, so my eyes were now capable of at least following a firefang's charge. I'd heard before that human sensory organs could perform much more than what the human body allowed. Whether I was able to deal with it or not, not being able to see even a single movement was out of the question, even if I was watching Gerbera.

But without any exaggeration whatsoever, I hadn't seen a single movement this girl had made. It was all over by the time I saw a black shadow appear. In short, this girl was far faster than Gerbera. It was impossible. There had to be a limit to such outlandishness. I felt like the only possibility was that she existed

on a different axis of time. Her strength, which bordered on completely illogical, was more than enough to identify her.

“...A cheater.”

The girl was all smiles upon hearing that word spill from someone’s lips. With that, her sharp features softened up in an instant. Even used to Lily’s smile as I was, it still felt like it could charm me.

“Oh come on, lino. Don’t go stealing all the good spots for yourself.”

Someone threw a friendly complaint at the girl. I turned around just as two boys in school uniforms came down from the fortress. Their gaits were so casual it was like they were on their way home from school, but one had a broadsword in hand while the other held a staff inlaid with a dazzling gem.

The girl sheathed her slender sword and turned a bittersweet smile toward them. “It’s fine to complain and all, but it was a race against time, right? Everyone was being so slow. It was faster for me to jump in alone.”

“Everyone’s a turtle compared to you.”

These three had suddenly appeared and stolen center stage. Both the students and the knights were watching their every move. The scene which played out before our eyes simply had that tremendous an impact.

“Juumonji. They’re all confused. We should start with introductions,” the girl said as she held a finger in the air.

“Oh yeah, you got a point there,” the schoolboy with the broadsword replied. He gave off the impression of an athlete. He was tall with a firm build, and he took on the gazes of all present with a hardy attitude. “Nice to meet you. Name’s Juumonji Tatsuya. This here’s lino Yuna and Watanabe Yoshiki.”

The girl who’d handily defeated the bull wrigglers shrugged and waved her hand shyly, while the schoolboy with the small build held up his staff in greeting.

“You probably realized this already, but we’re all members of the Colony’s exploration team,” Juumonji continued. The exploration team was an organization formed by the cheaters of the Colony, so these three really were

cheaters. Meaning... “Well done in getting through the forest safely. As for you knights, thank you for responding to our request. Our school friends are safe and sound thanks to you.”

So that’s what’s going on...

I finally got a grasp of the situation. For starters, I’d heard the name “Iino Yuna” before. There were many types of cheaters, ranging from warriors who possessed enhanced athleticism and mana to ones like me who possessed no actual strength but had very peculiar abilities. However, there were fewer than ten exceptions who possessed both these traits. Iino Yuna was one such exception.

The Skanda Iino Yuna. Her name was even known to the members of the home team who had nothing to do with battle. Her weapon was her speed. She was simply fast. Fast beyond description, true to her namesake of the swift-footed Buddhist deity. It was said that even among the gathering of superhumans in the exploration team, none could keep up with her. Having now seen it for myself, her speed was simply overwhelming.

And precisely because she was so famous, even I knew she was part of the hand-picked elites who formed the first expeditionary force. The group had departed far to the east in search of information regarding this world...and as a result, they’d triggered the deterioration of public safety in the Colony. In a sense, one could say they were responsible for the Colony’s destruction.

They had apparently accomplished their goal of finding the inhabitants of this world. Shiran mentioned they hadn’t searched the listening posts and taken the students under their protection by coincidence. They were requested to do so in case there were survivors. In other words, it had been the first expeditionary force, these people before my eyes, who’d made that request.

They had saved these students with us. And once again, they annihilated the monsters and removed the threat before them. They did so without an ounce of uncertainty or anxiety. They had power, and they brought about the natural conclusion born of such power.

“I’m happy to see you all safe and sound. There’s no need to worry anymore. We’re here now, so it’s alright.”

Juumonji's words conveyed his conviction that he was meant to protect others. And it wasn't just him. Iino and Watanabe were the same. Their attitudes were different, but these three members of the exploration team were all overflowing with confidence. Confidence in their own strength, their wills, and their very beings. They were like heroes living in a fairytale.

Don't be stupid. Like hell that's the case. They can't be heroes. They're just students—teenagers you can find anywhere.

"Just leave everything to us."

That was why his words gave me no relief. Leaving everything to them was what had brought about the tragedy in the Colony in the first place. I couldn't forget that hell.

The ones who had carried out such destruction were cheaters, just like them. They weren't saints. They were a group of minors liable to make mistakes when spurred on by greed. That was...supposed to be the case. So, what was going on around me?

I didn't even need to look around. The atmosphere in the area affirmed them as if they were heroes. "We can finally shake off all this misfortune which befell us. Danger will never come for us again. We can at last relax and feel at peace." The students, the knights, and even these three members of the exploration team didn't feel a single doubt toward such thoughts.

There was just one exception. Something was strange here. Something was off. There was an inconsistency. Detachment. Or maybe... Maybe I was the strange one here.

"Majima..." Lily anxiously called me. It felt like the warmth from her body was the only thing that proved my sanity.



I was safely shown into the fortress together with the other students. The three members of the exploration team had something to talk about with Shiran, so they all headed elsewhere within the building. We parted with the knights as well and followed our guide to our rooms.

The man who guided us differed from the fully armored knights. He only wore

armor over his upper body and was equipped with only a round shield not too dissimilar from mine. I only caught a glance while we were moving, but it seemed the sentries were similarly equipped with spears in hand. They were perhaps from a different organization than the knights.

Everyone received their own rooms, but I asked them to give me a shared room with Lily. This was the obvious choice, taking my personal safety into consideration. There were other small groups who wanted to share rooms, perhaps out of anxiety from being in an unfamiliar place, so we didn't really stand out in this regard.

The room we entered was simply furnished with two beds, a table by the window, and two chairs. The small window had a wooden frame. Surprisingly, there was a source of light installed on the wall, brightly illuminating the room. Upon closer inspection, it wasn't using electricity or fire. There was a stone about the size of a clenched fist embedded in the wall. The stone itself was emitting the light. This was probably some sort of magic. This world seemed to have gone through a technological development which differed greatly from ours.

By the time we managed to get a good look around our room, the man who guided us dropped by once more. He handed us a washbasin filled with water as well as a change of clothes before informing us that a banquet was going to be held to welcome the visitors from afar. He said he would come get us when the preparations were done. The man seemed quite nervous the entire time. His attitude was somewhat curious. But thinking of how strange aliens from another world were, his behavior was pretty normal.

After he left, I wiped off my body with a wet cloth and picked up the change of clothes. They honestly looked pretty uncomfortable. The fabric was kind of stiff. This was likely why the members of the exploration team we saw were all still wearing their blazers.

It already made me miss the feeling of the full set of clothes Gerbera made for me, but I couldn't really complain. I kept on my undershirt woven from Gerbera's threads and inlaid with Rose's armor and put on my new clothes. None of the equipment I brought with me had been confiscated, so I decided to keep them on my person as well.

The pseudo-Damascus steel sword and black protective gear Rose had made were all disguised to look like regular magical puppet equipment. Nobody had noticed this yet. I checked that the camouflage could be removed at any moment and then put everything on.

With all that in order, I took a seat on one of the beds and let out a long sigh. Everything up until now was going so well it was frightening. It made me feel stupid for preparing so much. But I couldn't honestly feel happy about it because of this sense of inconsistency I felt the entire time.

"Are you tired, Master?" Lily asked after carefully investigating the room. She stood before me and looked me in the eyes.

"...Cut the 'master' stuff out. We don't know who could be listening."

"It's at least fine here in this room, right? It looks properly soundproofed and all. Besides, this is about the only place Ayame and Asarina can stretch a bit, you know?"

"That's true..."

The moment I replied, Lily took off her blazer and placed it on the bed. She then unbuttoned her shirt. Her delicate nape down to her shoulders was exposed to the air along with her beautiful breasts—and everything illuminated by the room's light fixture from her chest down transformed into a transparent slime. There was a large cavity where her stomach was. The little fox curled up within raised her head with a curious yip.

If there was some sort of surveillance mechanism in this room, then our secrets were out of the bag all at once... But that really was overthinking things. I couldn't judge what was possible here, considering I had no knowledge of human society or what they could do with magic. If I began suspecting everything, I'd even have to consider whether we were safe hiding things beneath Lily's clothes.

"Got it, Lily. You can act normally when we're alone."

"So he says, Ayame."



Ayame had been waiting for my decision, and after being urged on by Lily, she jumped down to the floor, ran across the ground with a pitter-patter, and came over to me as I sprawled out on top of my bed. Her tail, which was about as large as her body, swayed vigorously behind her. It seemed she wanted attention. I stretched out my hand and scratched under her jaw as Ayame squinted in pleasure.

My playful heart stopped my fingers, causing Ayame to scratch at my hand with both her forelegs. She wasn't using her claws, so it didn't hurt in the least. Giving in to her pleading, I scratched her once more, following the grain of her fur then grazing against it. Ayame's fur was soft. This was because she bathed periodically and Gerbera groomed her fur once in a while using a comb Rose made.

When I stopped, she scratched at me once more. When I still didn't give in, she used both her forelegs to pull on my hand. Her desperate behavior was adorable. It really healed my heart.

I decided to stop being mean when she began yelping at me pitifully. While I was at it, I also undid the bandage around my left arm. The parasite creeper Asarina stretched out like a snake and coiled around Ayame.

"Master."

As I watched the two children play with each other, Lily changed clothes and sat down on the bed next to me. A tender warmth wrapped around my right arm. Lily leaned her body against me with an impish smile. Her sweet lips touched my cheek. She was like a little bird pecking at her food, or much like a small fox pulling at my hand. I could tell what she was asking for right away, so I honestly complied.

"Can you hear me out for a bit?" I asked.

"Of course."

I told Lily about what I had been feeling before our arrival at the fortress. She quietly listened to me until the very end.

There were some things I managed to figure out as I talked about it. To sum up this sense of discomfort, everyone was trusting each other too much too

quickly.

To Shiran and the people of this world, we were suspicious foreigners. They didn't have a single reason to trust us. They had risked their lives by braving the dangerous forest to rescue the students at the exploration team's request, but they had absolutely no obligation to do so.

This even applied to the students they were protecting. They all knew of that hell which had taken place at the Colony. So, how were they able to so easily accept us? Their reception was so favorable one would think they knew nothing of distrust.

"...It really is strange," Lily said in agreement after hearing me out. "I also felt the same inconsistency as you, Master. There's probably some circumstance behind this that we don't know about."

"Seems like we should find Shiran or the like to get the details sooner rather than later."

"Mm. You're right. But..." Lily nodded, but she hesitantly chose her next words. "Is it really that inconvenient?"

"Huh?" I stiffened up at her question.

"You described it as trusting too much too quickly, but that's not actually inconvenient for us, right? Actually, it's been going well for us so far, hasn't it?"

"That's..."

"We don't know what circumstances are driving this, so we need to confirm the situation just in case. But you know? That's not what you're actually worried about, Master."

I met Lily's eyes as she cocked her head and looked up at me. I was at a loss for words. She had a point. Things were going smoothly, so it was fine to be honestly pleased with that. Suspicions of the circumstances were a different problem entirely. And yet, I was unable to rejoice over this. As for why that was...

"From my view, it's like you're shocked by the inconsistency itself..." Lily said, looking me in the eyes.

And just then, a knock resounded through the room.

Chapter 3: Majima Takahiro's Story

Lily quickly rose to her feet. "I'll get it."

Ayame leaped into the air and crawled into Lily's cleavage while Asarina coiled around my left arm, which I then covered with the bandage. After verifying that the two of them were hidden, Lily undid the lock on the door and opened it slightly.

"Yes? Who is it?"

Her careful behavior was that of a guard. Lily was being cautious so that the visitor couldn't see me, just in case. But by doing so, I couldn't see them either. I figured the preparations for that banquet they mentioned were done and the man who'd brought us here had come back.

"Hwuuh?"

I heard a somewhat hysterical voice. My visitor was a man, or rather, a boy. Meaning it was more likely one of the students who came to this fortress with me.

Wait, no, this is...

"I heard this was Takahiro's room? Why are you here, Mizushima?"

"That's... Huh? Aren't you..."

Something was strange. I stood up and hurried over to the door. Lily turned around with a surprised expression, but she stepped aside as I opened the door. The schoolboy in the hallway turned to face me. He was a little shorter than me, but he had a sturdier physique to contrast that. His unkempt hair gave him an unpolished look. Our eyes met across his glasses.

"You're...Mikihiko?" It was someone I knew. A former classmate and friend.

"Yo, Takahiro. Long time no see."



He raised his hand with a flippant smile. I wasn't mistaken.

"Looks like you're okay too, Takahiro. I thought I wouldn't meet anyone I knew anymore. Hahaha. Don't you think the difficulty for clearing this world is way too high? Or maybe we got the difficulty setting wrong? Haha, there should be a limit to life's hard mode."

"What is this, a game now?"

Even as I quipped back, a smile came to my face. This really was just like him. This guy, Kaneki Mikihiro, was none other than my friend who had talked about otherworldly fantasy stories so passionately when we first got here. He had been a member of the home team back at the Colony, much like me. I was completely under the impression that he'd died on the day the Colony was destroyed.

"Oh man, it's really been a long time, huh?" he said.

"Yeah, it really has..."

His optimistic tone was exactly the same as the Mikihiro I knew. It proved to me better than anything else that this wasn't a ghost or impersonator. His survival suddenly had a sense of reality to it.

"Well, setting that aside," Mikihiro said before that sense of reality could turn into any sort of emotion, "there's one thing I gotta ask. Why's Mizushima here?"

"Why...?"

"Isn't this your room? I dropped by 'cause that's what I heard?"

It was in fact an impolite and inconsequential question, but Mikihiro's expression was dead serious. I exchanged looks with Lily, sighed deeply, looked up at the ceiling, and then shrugged.

"Could it be...exactly what I think it is? Is it? That's kinda shocking, man."

"Ahaha. You're the same as ever, Kaneki," Lily said with a strained smile. She was clearly using Mizushima Miho's memories as a reference.

"Huh? Mizushima, you know who I am? We've never actually talked, right?"

“It’s not all that hard to remember you when you’re always so loud.”

“Oof! You’re way harsher than you look,” Mikihiko replied as he smacked his forehead.

“You really haven’t changed...” I said, smiling awkwardly.

Yup. He really, really hasn’t changed. For a single instant, I felt like I could forget we were in another world, forget we were in a fortress in the middle of a dangerous forest rampant with monsters. I was happy my friend, who I thought I’d never see again, was alive. I was happy to speak with him like this. It was even more heartening to see this side of him hadn’t changed at all.

“Hm? Really? On that note, the air about you has kinda changed, Takahiro.”

“Has it? I can’t really tell.”

“How to put it? Intensity? Manliness? Something like that,” he said as he watched me touch my own cheek. Then he cackled. “I see you’ve become even more of a beauty than before, Mizushima. You two are like adults now... Oh man, the *implications!*”

“...What are you going on about?”

Lily and I did indeed have that kind of relationship, so he was right on the mark. If you swapped out Mizushima Miho for Lily, that is.

“Don’t be stupid. Well, come on in.”

He came out of his way to visit, so talking in the hallway was a little weird. But Mikihiko waved his hands in front of him.

“Oh, no. I came here to get you. Looks like they’re done preparing the banquet for their oh-so-great visitors from afar. I heard you were here, so I volunteered to guide you.”

“Oh, that so?”

“Come on, I’ll show you the way.”

I didn’t have a reason to refuse, so I obediently followed along. I left my room behind and went down the stone corridor. Mikihiko was half a step ahead while I followed at his side. Lily walked between us.

Mikihiko had four swords at his waist—two on the left and another two on the right—which looked to be the same as the shortswords the knights were using. His sheaths clanked against each other behind him. But with the exception of the addition of weapons, my friend looked the same as he always did.

“Walking along shoulder to shoulder like that... What, are you dating dammit? Aren’t you kinda close? Actually, I just got a glimpse of it earlier, but it looked like you two were sharing a bed. What’s going on?”

“You sure are paying attention to the small details...” I said with an astonished sigh before changing the topic. “So, you’re the survivor they mentioned who reached this fortress before us?”

“I’m surprised you can tell.”

“It’s just by process of elimination.”

Mikihiko wasn’t among the students I came here with, and he wasn’t a member of the exploration team. Meaning there was one possibility left. But that one possibility was somewhat unbelievable.

“How’d you even survive and get this far?”

Before I knew it, my voice had a hint of admiration to it. Surviving the chaos at the Colony and making it through this monster-filled forest was no small feat. It did of course require a certain degree of luck, but just having the guts to keep walking without giving up was worthy of praise. This guy wasn’t just fooling around.

“Well. I almost died a few times. But that goes the same for you, doesn’t it?”

“...I guess.”

Fortunately, Mikihiko didn’t notice the unnatural delay in my response.

“Besides, I wasn’t all on my own the entire time. You see, after I scurried away from the Colony, when I seriously thought I was a goner, the commander of the Alliance Knights here picked me up.”

“That’s not all that different from us. It was the lieutenant in our case, though.”

“Ooh, Lieutenant Shiran? I see. She said she wanted to talk with you later. Said she promised to explain a bunch of stuff to you.”

“Oh yeah, I guess she did.”

I thought she would just leave it to a subordinate, but apparently Shiran’s personality was as honest as the impression she gave.

“She’s in the middle of talking over some stuff with the exploration team, right?” I asked.

“Yup. There might still be some survivors in the Woodlands, so they’re having a meeting about a rescue mission, I think. There’s too many students, so they can’t really protect them all. Being in the Woodlands for too long is dangerous too, so Shiran’s unit only went through a few listening posts. That’s why they’re having another team head out. That said, seeing that the exploration team is here, it’ll probably be the Imperial Knights who head—”

“H-Hang on, Mikihiko,” I said, stopping his rambling. This part hadn’t changed either...or rather, he’d yet to fix it. “Sorry, I can’t keep up. Can you explain things in order from the beginning?”

“Oh yeah, you two don’t know anything about this fortress yet, huh? Okay. I’ll have to keep things a bit short, but if you don’t mind that, then—”

Mikihiko had a fairly good grasp of the situation in this fortress, despite arriving here just a little before us. And although it was just for a short while, as we made our way to the banquet, I listened to everything he had to say.



According to Mikihiko, the first expeditionary force reached another fortress to the east, Fort Ebonus. This was two weeks ago. Around the same time, they heard the news of the Colony’s destruction. Mikihiko, though quite familiar with the situation, didn’t know this, but we knew Mizushima Miho’s childhood friend, Takaya Jun, had headed east to get help from the expeditionary force. Perhaps others who also headed east, or Takaya Jun himself, had told them of the tragic news.

Immediately following that, Fort Ebonus sent a message to Fort Tilia. There was quite the distance between the two fortresses, but they had some means

of long-distance communication in place for exactly such situations. It used magic, but Mikihiko didn't know much about it.

The message from Fort Ebenus was a rescue request for the students who had escaped the Colony. In response, Shiran led a force of knights into the forest immediately. Meanwhile, the expeditionary force formed a team focused on speed and dispatched them to Fort Tilia. This team was made up of three people centered around the Skanda Iino Yuna. They arrived at the fortress two days ago. That was why Shiran didn't know about their arrival.

"That's the long-short of things. So, about their plans from now. The second rescue team was waiting for Shiran's unit of Alliance Knights to return before dispatching. The guys from the exploration team also seem intent on joining the rescue operations. And the ones accompanying them will be from the Imperial Knights. Well, that's just my prediction, though."

There were currently three military organizations stationed within Fort Tilia: the Southern Imperial Army, the Second Company of the Imperial Knights, and the Third Company of the Alliance Knights. There must have been a good reason for military bodies from different affiliations to all be stationed in one fortress.

"Don't you find it strange there's a fortress in the middle of a forest like this, Takahiro? When you think of fortresses, you think of something to repel foreign invaders, right? But there's no human settlements deeper into the forest."

"...Meaning the 'foreign invaders' in this case aren't human?"

"Exactly. Fort Tilia was constructed as a stronghold to protect the human world from the monsters in the Woodlands. As such, the Empire and the countries which form the Alliance, basically their vassal states, each dispatch forces to the fortress."

The threat of monsters was apparently large enough to force multiple countries to unite together against it. These circumstances convinced me as to why the knights answered the exploration team's rescue request. In short, it was a matter of profit.

I didn't know how well the knights and soldiers of this world could fight. But thinking back on their response to the bull wrigglers, they couldn't fight

independently against monsters the way cheaters could.

As students nonsensically teleported to another world, we were all extremely irregular beings. We had nothing to do with this world, so normally, no organization out there would have any reason to brave danger and save us. However, the cheaters, who could easily scatter the monsters of the Woodlands, were an extremely valuable force here. If they had discovered the cheaters' value, it would make sense they'd bend over backward so they didn't miss out on this stroke of good fortune.

"So... Oh, we're here," Mikihiko muttered. There was still more he had to say, but we had arrived at our destination.

Our destination turned out to be a room about the size of a classroom. I could sense multiple people already inside.

"Thanks, Mikihiko. That was enlightening."

We had managed to get quite a lot of information in a short period of time. There was still more I wanted to ask about, but it could wait until next time. We brought our conversation to an end and stepped into the room. Gathered inside were mostly students, including the members of the exploration team. It seemed we had taken a little longer coming here.

The warm reception they prepared for us was a buffet-style party. A line of food stretched down a long table. From what I could see, their eating habits here didn't differ much from our world. There was bread, soup, and hearty-looking meat dishes. There wasn't any fish, though, probably because of the locale. Root vegetables compensated for the lack of green ones.

With their first proper meal in ages before them, the students looked to be ravenous. I wasn't any different in this regard. I unintentionally gulped at the delicious-looking food, which caused Lily to giggle.

Aside from the students and the serving staff, there were several elderly men in the room. They weren't by the table of food but were instead having some sort of meeting further in the back. Despite not wearing armor or helmets, the men had a peculiarly imposing air about them. They were surely some higher-ups from the army or knights or the like. They wore colorful uniforms, and even in their advanced age, they had sturdy-looking bodies.

Just then, my eyes coincidentally met one of theirs.

“...?”

Feeling the pressure from his gaze, I reflexively stared right back. We weren't glaring at each other or anything like that. But even so, we weren't just appraising each other either. His gaze had a mysterious fervor to it. It definitely wasn't anything like malice. However, it felt heavier than simple goodwill. His eyes contained emotions I'd never had directed at me before in my life.

It felt uncomfortable, so I averted my gaze. Taking another look around the room, I realized the other men were the same. They looked at the students, including myself, with strangely intense gazes. They were like... They were like pious believers gazing upon a religious painting.

But what I found even more mysterious was how the students other than me didn't think anything of these gazes. They were acting perfectly natural while chatting amongst themselves. Did they fail to notice the occasional looks directed at them...? No, that was impossible. They simply showed no signs of caring. That “inconsistency,” which I had forgotten about while speaking with Mikihiko, once more began encroaching on my mind.

“It seems everyone has gathered now.” With our arrival, one of the elderly men decided it was time to start the party and began addressing the room. “I am pleased to meet you all. I am the general responsible for this fortress, Jairus Greene.”

This man was apparently the most important person in the entire fortress. I stared in shock as he placed his hand to his chest and bowed deeply at the waist. This man, who was several times our age and held tremendously high social status, was showing an excessive amount of respect to a bunch of teenagers.

It was clear from the slight trembling in his expression that this wasn't merely a diplomatic courtesy. His voice was full of tension and intoxication, accompanied by an indisputable sense of reverence. I continued to stand there watching in astonishment as Jairus raised his head once more.

“Welcome, hallowed saviors descended from another world. It is an honor to make your acquaintance.”

What the hell's with that? That was my honest opinion. My mind came to a complete stop. I couldn't even process any other proper thoughts.

"It would normally be customary to invite you to the capital and have His Imperial Majesty personally welcome you, but this fortress lies deep within the Woodlands. Please forgive us for only being able to receive you in such a humble manner."

"Please, there's no need for that, General Jairus," said the schoolboy with a large build from the exploration team, Juumonji. "We came here to see our request fulfilled, after all. Allow me to offer my gratitude once more. Thank you very much for saving my fellow schoolmates. I must also thank you for lending a hand in the upcoming rescue operation. I'm sure that with your help, we will safely reunite with the others."

Juumonji's attitude was grandiose. He showed no fear of the attention he was gathering. A smile formed on his virile face. The way he accepted the respect of this old man before him, as if it were perfectly natural, almost made his body seem larger than it was. He was like the protagonist out of a story, like a hero extolled in legends...or like the savior of the world.

What a farce... We weren't anything like heroes. We were just commonplace teenagers one could find anywhere in Japan. We just happened to be teleported to another world, as extraordinary as that was. Didn't everything we went through teach us that? Did they forget about all that chaos and disgraceful behavior on the day the Colony fell? If they remembered their powerlessness, their own pitiful states, then there was no way they could dream about being heroes.

At least, that was supposed to be the case. I was evidently the only one who felt that way. The students who had needed the knights' protection to get here didn't really show any signs of doubt. On the contrary, they gazed longingly toward Juumonji. There was even admiration in their eyes.

A powerful sense of discomfort shook my brain. I didn't get it. It felt like I was standing among aliens. Lily was the only one who felt the same discomfort as me...

"What a load of bullshit."

Or not.

“...Mikihiko?”

His muttering was truly quiet. Nobody heard him aside from me. He coldly observed the room from behind his glasses. Then he looked at me standing there in confusion.

“Great, looks like you’re normal, Takahiro,” he suddenly said. “The party’s starting and all, so let’s have a chat. Come on.”



I was under the impression that teleportation from another world was a rare phenomenon, but that apparently wasn’t the case here. On the contrary, the existence of these “visitors from afar” was a well-known fact.

“Even if you only count us, that’s still about a thousand people teleported here. It wouldn’t be all that strange if there were others, yeah?”

That’s what Mikihiko said. He did have a point. But our case was still an exception. It seemed so many people appearing at once had never happened before. On average, visitors appeared in this world once a century. Normally, it was just one at a time. Even when several people appeared at once, there were only ever a handful of them.

Besides that, everything else was the same as our case. For example, everyone who was teleported here, without exception, possessed outlandish power. I was under the impression that the locals had just discovered how valuable the cheaters of the exploration team were. But in fact, they knew how useful they were from the very beginning.

Or maybe “useful” wasn’t the right word. Their respect toward visitors verged on reverence. That was precisely why they spoke so formally and greeted us as “hallowed saviors descended from another world.” Thinking back on it now, it wasn’t all that odd.

The people here had to deal with the threat of monsters at all times. So, say people with preposterous powers appeared and handily obliterated these atrocious monsters. And upon speaking with them, they found out these powerful people came from another world. They would be treated as saviors. It

would be strange if they weren't.

From what Mikihiko told me, the legends stated that the very first savior came to this world when humanity was on the verge of extermination by monsters. Furthermore, when left at large, the threat from monsters constantly escalated every year. Humans constantly had to take up arms to fight them. The advent of saviors every century had kept the monsters at bay for thousands of years. It was directly connected to the survival of the human race.

From another perspective, the existence of what these people called "saviors" was like a system built into the very world itself to maintain human society. As such, society here made sure they could properly receive any visitors. Having a means of communicating with them was an easy-to-understand example of this.

"Don't you find it weird, Takahiro? There are thousands of languages in our world. Even here, they have multiple languages based on different origins. Normally, it'd be impossible to communicate."

"Oh yeah..."

I recalled the letter I retrieved from the ghoul who attacked us. It was written in a language I had never seen before. And yet, all of the students, including myself, could speak with the people here without any difficulty. I had also found this rather strange.

"This world's languages are different from ours. But going out of their way to teach the oh-so-great saviors how to speak from scratch is way too roundabout. Having said that, they have no idea where their wonderful heroes are going to come from, so it's difficult for them to learn our language... Well, you can sympathize with that last part, right, Takahiro?" Mikihiko jokingly said with a laugh.

"...Sorry for having crap grades in English. I have the grammar down at least," I replied with a scowl.

"But you suck at listening."

"..."

"Haha. It's a relief to see you like that. Anyway, they managed problems like

these with magic.”

They apparently had the means to solve this. They developed magic technology that used a special mineral to create runestones. These exhibited a multitude of effects. The lighting fixture installed in my room here, as well as the stone that formed a barrier around that hut, were examples of runestones. In short, there were also translation runestones that worked like auto-translation devices.

“But...runestones? Isn’t that kind of cliché?”

“Nope. That’s kinda the point.”

According to Mikihiko, the translation runestone allowed people to converse with each other in proximity to its user. However, the words one heard depended on the target’s cognition; it chose words from the target’s language that most closely matched what was being said. That was why multiple people could listen to the same thing but hear different words.

In a world with mana and magic, it only made sense for them to focus on something that could be used by everyone instead of being dependent on an individual. The reason I heard the tool they created as “runestones” was purely because the word was convenient for me to understand. It felt cliché, but that was because it was such a widespread concept in fiction already.

It really was convenient, but I wasn’t one to talk. My cheat, the magical connection I had with monsters, could be said to be a kind of translation magic.

This translation runestone certainly was useful, but it required specialist training to use. Shiran was one such person who was trained and entrusted with one. That was how I was able to converse with her on the way to the fortress.

“Here in Fort Tilia, there are several people like Lieutenant Shiran with translation runestones. I don’t think we’ll have any problem communicating while we’re here.”

That’s what Mikihiko said, but conversely, it also meant we would slam into a language barrier if we were to leave this area for some reason. Depending on how things developed, I needed to prepare some sort of countermeasure.

Anyways, that was why visitors from afar were treated like saviors. However, whether we wanted to be treated like that was another matter altogether. We were children thrown into this world without knowing left from right. In a sense, we were victims. We couldn't possibly be some sort of heroes.

After what happened the day the Colony fell, nobody would dream of being a hero. That was my opinion, but... Say I didn't know of that day. What then? The Colony's collapse and the disaster which followed flipped my sense of values. Things would be completely different if I didn't go through that change, though. This was the source of the "inconsistency" I felt.

"You listening, Takahiro? Those three from the exploration team were part of the first expeditionary force. They know about the Colony's destruction, but that's all. They only heard about it. They never saw it. They never *felt* what happened there."

They did say, "seeing is believing," but the phrase wasn't even necessary here. In the truest sense, those three had no idea what happened in the Colony. That was why Juumonji dared to say such naïve words like, "I am sure that with your help, we will safely reunite with the others."

"Just think of how those guys got here in the first place. After coming to a new world, they woke up to the strongest possible powers, effortlessly beat up monsters, protected a bunch of powerless students, and went off on a grand adventure to cross the forest. From their view, they faced off against countless trash mobs and pushed through untrodden lands with their unlimited stamina. And once they found the human world, they get praised as hallowed saviors this and exalted heroes that."

Mikihiko's words were filled with cynicism, but he wasn't wrong. The pain, suffering, and fear, the despair and frustration—all the hardships I'd experienced since arriving here didn't exist in any way whatsoever for them.

"I'm sure they had their own worries. But theirs were nothing more than something they could overcome by cheering each other on. It's nothing compared to the helplessness and misery of having to wander that forest on your own."

Their anxieties were nothing more than spice to liven up their heroic tale.

Their spectacular activities were enough to make such worries shine...

“Even though we’re all in the same otherworldly fantasy, the genres of our stories are different.”

This statement was very like Mikihiko. Myself and the thirteen students I accompanied to the fortress were in one genre, while the exploration team members were in another.

“Despite only being there for a short while, we had a community of over a thousand people living there. We referred to it simply as the Colony, but it was quite large. It wasn’t like every single person experienced hell that day. The guys you came here with all left with exploration team members who’d stayed behind. They managed to avoid the chaos and took refuge in those huts.”

I knew a similar story—Katou. She escaped the destruction of the Colony, and Mizushima Miho’s childhood friend, Takaya Jun, protected her and brought her to that hut. Meaning there were others who had such luck. But unlike Katou, and unlike myself, they didn’t see any of that hell before someone protected them and took them away.

“So, that’s why...”

I recalled my walk toward this fortress. The harmonious atmosphere. Those warm words. The students cheering each other on. The student who acted like a peacemaker. The delinquent. The bullied kid. I had viewed the scenery, just like one could see in any modern Japanese classroom, as if it were merely transported into a forest. It was really unnatural. There had to be some reason they remained exactly as they were even after being thrown into this world.

Someone was always protecting them. From beginning to end. From the moment they were teleported here to the moment the Colony fell. Even on their journey to this fortress. They were protected the entire time.

Thinking back on it now, the way they fell into a panic when the bull wrigglers attacked was perfectly natural. That was the first time they had been truly confronted with danger. And once again, they were saved. Saved by the exploration team.

From their perspective, the exploration team had been protecting them this

entire time. They didn't even think to question how the people here treated them as saviors. They were simply acknowledging their heroes. But that wasn't all...

"The great power we call cheats, they refer to them as blessings here. Supposedly, all the visitors who appeared up until now wielded these mysterious powers. That means even the students of the home team like you and me are no exception."

I knew this since I'd already awakened to my own ability, but now even the students of the home team knew they possessed some kind of hidden power. So, to them, the heroes of the exploration team were the pioneers they had to catch up to. One day, they would become like that. It was natural they'd believe so.

"It's seriously a load of bullshit! Saviors my ass!"

Mikihiko's emotions began flaring as he talked about all this. He clenched his fist. There was righteous indignation in his anger. He remembered the tragic events of the Colony, felt the weight of all those lives crushing down on him, so the thoughtless students getting all merry over being treated like oh-so-great heroes got on his nerves. I understood how he felt. I understood so well it hurt. But on the other hand, I couldn't express it outwardly like he could.

"Great, looks like you're normal, Takahiro."

That was what he had said when I stood there full of doubt over the abnormal atmosphere in the room. But who exactly was the normal one here? Who was the abnormal one? Once I began thinking of this, I felt stuck between a rock and a hard place.

"Oh."

And just as we hit a good stopping point, Mikihiko noticed something and raised his voice. The party was in full swing now, and the three members of the exploration team were taking center stage. But two people had just entered the venue.

"Commander!" Mikihiko yelled, and the two women began walking over to us.

The one to the front was a tall woman with a muscular build and short, silver hair. Mikihiko ran over to meet her. Seeing his happy reaction, I figured this was the commander of the Third Company of the Alliance Knights who had saved him in the Woodlands. The sight of the short Mikihiko running over to the tall woman somehow resembled a dog running to its owner. He looked quite emotionally attached. Lily saved me in much the same way, so even if our relationships were different, his happiness was pretty easy to understand.

As I watched Mikihiko run off, the blonde elf with blue eyes, who had been walking behind the silver-haired woman, came over to me. This was the knight who'd brought me to this fortress, Shiran. She wasn't wearing her armor, perhaps because this was a party.

"Sir, my apologies for being late even though this is your long-awaited reception banquet," she said in an overly formal manner as she tapped her heels together and bowed her head.

I looked down at her blonde hair with extremely complex feelings.

"Please raise your head. There's no need to apologize. Besides, I'm not that important a person."

"What are you saying, sir? You are one of the exalted saviors descended from another world. Moreover, are you not one who managed to travel through the Woodlands on foot?"

I didn't pay much attention to this grandiose phrasing before, but now I knew the source of this behavior. It was completely misdirected respect. Not only that, the way she humbled herself made me feel uncomfortable. But no matter what I could say, Shiran didn't seem like she would allow her respect for the saviors of the world to waver. Her direct gaze and sincere expression spoke volumes of the expectations she had in the very existence of these saviors.

It was verging on religious zeal.

And just then, I realized this *was* religious zeal.

We were like living gods to them. Here, where magic existed and legendary heroes regularly appeared and saved the people from monsters, the advent of saviors was an absolute faith that existed within the hearts of every human

living in these lands.

I didn't know whether this applied to absolutely everyone, but at the very least, the ones before my eyes naïvely believed in this. They believed that if they fought for their lives, if they endured, one day a savior would appear and fight alongside them. And right here, right now, we descended upon them.

They believed we were their saviors, come to save them from their plight. They didn't doubt it for a moment. If they saw us in trouble, they would lend a hand without hesitation. They paid the utmost respect possible and wouldn't back down. They surely couldn't even imagine the armor I had hidden beneath my clothes, or the way I was suspicious of their every move.

What ignorant stupidity... But I guess I can't really think that way myself.

Trust thy neighbor. Don't suspect others of malice.

Even I lived that way once upon a time. They possessed something magnificent, something I lost after coming to this world. That also applied to the students here. Those exploration team members were probably going to contribute greatly as saviors. With their dreadful powers, expelling the threat of monsters from human lands was easier than exterminating pests. It was somewhat paradoxical, but these "brave heroes" possessed such grand powers that they required no bravery to accomplish such feats.

Even the home team students they protected would one day awaken to their own powers and live on as heroes. Their stories were a different genre than mine. Tragedy didn't exist for them. They were going to live wonderfully as heroes without even knowing such horrors.

This wasn't a bad thing. They were trying to use their powers for good, after all. But I did in fact know things they didn't. I knew of the filthiness of humans. I knew of despair. I was soaked in agony. I experienced misery.

However, using that as a pretense to dismiss people who naïvely believed in others was a little wrong.

I didn't become someone who suspected others of malice. I lost my ability to trust them.

I didn't gain anything from my experience. I lost something important as a

person.

They could trust their neighbors. I doubted mine.

It was easy to see which was the more proper path.

“Takahiro?”

At Shiran’s call, I came back to my senses. She was looking at me with an anxious expression.

“O-Oh. What is it?”

“I promised I would offer an explanation for anything you do not yet understand... But I must apologize, sir. Could you wait for a little while longer?”

“I don’t really mind,” I replied with a nod. “Now that you mention it, is this related to the reason you’re late to the party?”

“No, that was a different matter. I just couldn’t get the bull wriggler attack this afternoon off my mind. I was observing the forest from the walls for a little while.”

“...”

She didn’t discover Gerbera, did she? My thoughts drifted in that direction precisely because I knew how careless that girl could be. If she ended up unable to bear it any longer, got too close to the fortress, and was spotted by the soldiers, it would cause a huge ruckus. It wouldn’t be funny in the least. There were three cheaters here. I really wanted her to quietly wait for me.

Shiran seemed to interpret my delicate expression as anxiety toward the defense of the fortress. Her pretty face was now accented with a smile.

“Please be at ease, sir. Embarrassing as it is, it was naught but needless anxiety on my part.”

“Is that so? That’s good then... Really.”

“I must go and greet everyone who accompanied me on the way here. If possible, could we speak after that?”

“Oh. About that... Sorry, but I’d like to call it a night. Could you spare me some time another day?”

“Very well, sir. I shall contact you on another occasion.”

“Huh? Takahiro, you turning in?” Mikihiko asked, having overheard our conversation.

“Yeah,” I replied with a nod. “I just got here, so I’m a little tired. Sorry, Mikihiko. I still don’t know my way around here. Could you show me the way back to my room?”

“Sure. What’ll you do, Mizushima?”

“I’ll go back too. I can’t just leave Majima on his own.”

“Roger that. Man, it’s getting hot in here. Well then, Commander, I’ll be back later.”

After saying goodbye to the commander and Shiran, we left the party behind.



I spent the time walking back to my room chatting frivolously with Mikihiko. I had gotten most of the information I wanted from our earlier conversation already, so I had nothing more to ask him. But it was a different matter for Mikihiko himself.

“Hey, Takahiro,” he said just as we reached my room, “you probably don’t want to remember, so you don’t need to answer me if you don’t want to. But can I ask you one thing about the day the Colony ended?”

“What?”

“You were working in the same group as Masaki and Soushi, right? Do you know what happened to them?”

Those were the names of friends we had in common.

“They died,” I replied immediately. I predicted he would ask about this. That was probably why my words came out so calmly. “They died that day, right before my eyes.”

I didn’t plan on saying more.

One of them died in misery while being tormented. The other was swallowed by flames and turned to ash.

Nothing would come from him knowing this. It was better to remain silent. That was what I believed.

“I see,” Mikihiko muttered.

I tried to keep it as brief as I could, but that might’ve touched a nerve. Mikihiko didn’t ask anything else. Instead, he said, “I’m glad you survived, Takahiro. You too, of course, Mizushima.”

“Yeah. I’m also glad I got to see you again,” I replied.

Mikihiko flashed a grin and left. I watched his back as he went down the corridor and let out a sigh. I was happy to see him again; I was telling the truth. However, I still kept secrets from him until the very end. What was lost would never return. Not the lives lost, not the simple relationships without a hidden facet to them, and perhaps not even our past selves.

“Master,” Lily whispered in my ear as she hugged my arm. Her voice trembled with anxiety. She was worried about me.

I wrapped my arm around her waist and pulled her in toward me. “Thanks. But I’m okay.”

“Really?”

“Really. I’m not bluffing.”

It’d be a lie to say I’m not jealous. I did in fact feel a sense of inconsistency. I was shocked by the unconditional trust both the students and the knights showed. I was no longer able to live like that. I couldn’t join their group. That which I required to do so would never return to me, after all. Nevertheless, it was inconsequential.

“I have all of you with me.”

I chose to protect the warmth in my arms rather than grieve over what I had lost. I would keep secrets for their sake. I would be as careful as I needed to be. That was who the human known as Majima Takahiro was now.

I didn’t feel any shame regarding this. It wasn’t like I refused to acknowledge the boys and girls who were going to live like heroes, let alone make fun of them. But that didn’t mean I would needlessly abase myself. Just maybe, being

able to so strongly feel the difference between us was my greatest harvest from the day.

“Let’s get inside,” I said as I let go of Lily. “We should talk. I’ve got a grasp of the situation. There’s a bunch of things I need to ask Shiran tomorrow. Like whether there are other monster tamers aside from me in this world, and how we can get provisions after we get out of here. Also, we need to do something about being able to communicate...”

“You *are* pretty bad at language studies.”

“You’re going there too...? Guess I’ll have to put my hope in runestones, huh?”

I entered the room with Lily in tow, the door clacking shut behind us.

Chapter 4: Guidance and Training

The following morning...

After Lily and I changed, a soldier dropped by to guide us to breakfast. The section of the fortress we were staying in was apparently also used by a portion of the knights. When we passed by several well-dressed knights, they came to a stop and courteously bowed to us, leaving me somewhat uneasy.

The regular soldiers seemed to be staying elsewhere, so fortunately our escort was the only one we had to meet. This sort of treatment only made me feel uncomfortable. I felt like if I got used to it, I'd start to misunderstand something.

The soldier brought us to a room somewhat smaller than yesterday's party room. After exchanging greetings with the other students who were already eating, we headed over to the woman who was serving food. She handed us bread, which was still fresh from the oven, along with a root vegetable salad. She then scooped out some soup from a pot filled with large chunks of floating meat, handing that over as well.

We took our meals, headed over to a table, and sat down across from each other. Just as I started eating, Mikihiko dropped by.

"Morning, Takahiro, Mizushima."

"Mikihiko? Morning."

"Morning, Kaneki. That's a whole lot of food," Lily said in a somewhat astonished tone.

Mikihiko sat down beside me. His wooden tray was topped with about three times my portion.

"They'll bring it over if you ask. How 'bout asking for more too, Takahiro?"

"I'm fine. I can't eat that much in the morning. Actually, were you always such a big eater?"

“Hmm. Well, I almost starved to death before. My constitution changed after that.”

It was somewhat startling to hear, but he spoke of it as if it were nothing more than idle chatter as he jammed some bread into his mouth.

“I’m a little scared I’ll get fat from this sooner or later. I’ve gotta get some proper exercise in.”

So he said, but he was thinner than I remembered. He probably hadn’t recovered from nearly starving to death yet. Maybe his body was simply compensating.

Mikihiko continued to greedily gulp down his food as he got the conversation moving.

“Speaking of exercise, what’re you two up to today? You gonna join the training?”

“Training...?”

“Oh yeah. You didn’t hear about it since you left early.” Mikihiko twirled his spoon around and went on to explain everything that happened after we returned to our room. “All of you who just got here don’t really know anything about the fortress, yeah? So, the general in charge is gonna personally give a tour. They’ll even be observing some military drills. After that, personnel from the fortress will do some light training with anyone who wants to. Sword and magic fantasy training, that is.”

“Hmm.”

“Even though the home team members have cheats, they’re not self-aware of what they are, right? It’s a total waste of talent. They’re apparently gonna start testing a whole lotta things starting today to try and find out what their cheats are.”

“I see.”

It wasn’t a bad idea. It took encountering a monster up close for me to realize my own ability. I could understand them wanting to take every opportunity they could. Unfortunately, I’d already awakened to my cheat, so there wasn’t

really a point in me participating.

I then lowered my gaze to the shortwords hanging from Mikihiko's waist.

"How about you, Mikihiko? You participating in this training?"

He took a glance at the other students in the room and snorted. "Huh? Me? With *them*? Why?"

I smiled at his easy-to-understand attitude. I had no intention of criticizing him for it, though. Frankly, I didn't like the guys from the exploration team either, and I didn't have a good impression of the other students. But it was just boring old envy on my part. Regardless, I couldn't do anything about it.

"I plan on meeting the commander today," Mikihiko said as he chowed down on his food. "Well, not that I didn't yesterday, I guess. Or the day before that..."

I recalled the silver-haired woman I met yesterday. At the same time, I remembered how emotionally attached Mikihiko was to her.

"You're quite smitten with her, huh?"

"Smitten? That sounds nice. It gets right to the point in all sorts of ways," he said with a hearty laugh. He wasn't shy about it in the least. He was apparently serious about her.

"I'm surprised. Weren't you only interested in 2D before?"

"I'm serious enough to change doctrines. Well, there's all kinds of hurdles, though. The difference in nationality and worlds, and even our age gap would probably work out one way or another. But the difference in status seems pretty insurmountable..."

"Status?"

"She may not look it, but she's a bonafide princess of a small country."

"...A person like that is serving as the commander of the knights?"

"She's got a whole lot going on..."

From what Mikihiko said, the "Alliance" of the Third Company of the Alliance Knights referred to a group of small countries that bordered the Woodlands. The Third Company was composed of knights dispatched from one specific

country among them, and someone from the royal family always served as the commander. It really felt like the troublesome matters of another world. I wanted to avoid getting involved in it as much as possible.

“She’s got it pretty tough in her own way. I want to support her,” Mikihiko said calmly.

“...I see.”

Mikihiko was apparently planning to dive headfirst into the troublesome circumstances I wanted nothing to do with. It wasn’t hard to see why, though. I felt like I could more or less understand his feelings.

Mikihiko told me yesterday that there were no records of saviors ever returning to where they came from. Meaning we were all destined to die on this planet one day. In that case, I wanted to spend the rest of my long life here together with my servants.

Mikihiko likely thought of the commander in the same way. His feelings prompted him to involve himself in the affairs of this world. No matter what difficulties I might come across, I couldn’t possibly consider leaving Lily and the others. He was the same; just instead of meeting monsters, he met a human from this world. If he’d met monsters instead of the commander, perhaps our positions would be different here.

All I could do for him was offer my words of encouragement.

“Hang in there.”

Mikihiko smiled ever so shyly and nodded back to me as Lily looked on with a smile of her own.

“Hm?” I cocked my head. Her expression looked strangely happy. “What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

Lily shook her head and returned to her meal. Was it something she couldn’t say here? Or was it really nothing...? Regardless, she would presumably tell me about it later.

With that, I spent the rest of breakfast chatting with Mikihiko. Half of the

topics he brought up were related to the commander; the other half were about my relationship with “Mizushima Miho.” In short, it was all just idle chatter. I didn’t get any relevant information out of it. That’s what idle chatter between friends was anyhow.

Lily didn’t participate in our conversation much. She just watched over us with a happy expression as we talked, as if she was in the greatest of moods.



After we finished breakfast, we decided to join the tour Mikihiko had told us about. All the other students, aside from the ones who weren’t in good health, were also taking part.

General Greene was leading the tour personally at the fore. Accompanying him were two men who were the top brass of the Imperial Southern Army and the Imperial Knights. These two were striking up conversations with the students and asking them questions.

As for General Greene, he went on to speak at length of how Fort Tilia was impregnable, how the soldiers protecting it were powerful, how talented a person he was to be entrusted with such an important location, and so on and so forth. Even I could tell what the point of all this posturing was.

Simply put, they were trying to appeal to their potential saviors. The job of giving this tour was probably highly sought after, given that. The only ones participating were in fact all of the most important men in the fortress. The lack of presence from the Alliance Knights was likely due to the circumstances Mikihiko alluded to. The small countries that made up the Alliance were vassals of the Empire, so their position in the fortress wasn’t terribly significant.

In any case, the tour itself was worthwhile. The cheerful General Greene guided us through a good portion of the fortress. Fort Tilia was composed of many flat wall sections connected by towers. The moat encircling the outer walls served as an extra defensive layer and even had its own taller inner wall. One could walk along the ramparts of both the inner and outer walls. From this vantage, I was able to look down on the Woodlands where we had been wandering for the last two months.

These positions were used to intercept invaders during emergencies. There

were also defensive towers in place at key points of the fortress. Fort Tilia was an enormous structure capable of accommodating a military force over a thousand strong.

We didn't go through every nook and cranny, but it was still helpful to grasp its general layout. It could be useful to know, for example, where the defenses were thinnest, in case Lily was found out and we needed to run away. It was of course best it didn't come to that. However, unforeseen events had a tendency to occur. I needed to hammer the layout of the defenses here into my head as much as possible.



After our tour came to an end, they brought us to one of the training grounds within the fortress. It was a large room with a sandy floor, and inside soldiers armed with spears were zealously training.

"What do you think, my dear guests?!" General Greene shouted with pride.

"It's splendid. You can feel their passion," Juumonji replied. He had naturally become the representative for those on the tour.

The soldiers were in fact passionate about their training. They couldn't possibly cut corners when parading themselves before their heroes. Perhaps there had been fierce competition for this role as well.

"Haha. Juumonji, it's an honor to hear that from you, sir," General Greene replied with a satisfied nod. "Oh yes, could I ask you to allow the soldiers the honor of sparring with you?"

"Sure. I don't mind."

Aside from Iino, who didn't look interested, the other two members of the exploration team accepted the general's request. This mock battle was meant to put the strength of the exploration team on full display.

The soldier facing off against Juumonji was a particularly brawny-looking man. The muscles beneath his armor were thick, and even as he swung his heavy broadsword around, his torso didn't budge an inch.

However, he was nothing more than an infant when faced with a cheater. The

soldier charged in with a roar, but Juumonji easily dodged him. He casually wielded his sword and effortlessly repelled the soldier's full-force strikes.

Seeing the soldier seize his dominant hand with a small groan, a bold smile crept up on Juumonji's virile face. "What's wrong? Is that all you've got?!"

The warriors, who made up the large majority of cheaters, excelled in close combat. From what I heard back in the Colony, they instinctively knew how best to move when fighting. Juumonji's movements were somewhat wild, but they had a grandness to them that one would never attribute to a student living in peaceful Japan.

It had been two months since we found ourselves in this world. Considering he hadn't done any genuine training, "abnormal" didn't even begin to describe this. His physical abilities stood out above all else. The difference in sheer strength between the soldier and Juumonji was like that of an infant and an adult.

"Now it's my turn!"

Juumonji let out a gallant roar and took action, forcing the soldier into a defensive battle. The man was desperately trying to fend him off, but his reflexes couldn't keep up at all. After Juumonji toyed with him as much as he pleased, a dull thud rang out as he swatted the sword from the soldier's hand.

The students watching the bout cheered. Juumonji had plenty of energy to spare. The same went for Watanabe, who also participated in a bout. These were cheaters. Saviors. Heroes.

"..."

I gave a sidelong glance at the excited students as they watched the exploration team members spar. I just couldn't get used to this atmosphere. I couldn't watch with sparkling eyes like they did.

Take the soldier who faced off against Juumonji, for example. He was sure to have gone through intense training. His sword was packed with years and years of experience. It was as if I could sense this after recently starting my special training with Gerbera. In contrast, I couldn't feel any of that from Juumonji.

By all rights, this should've been something acquired through the dedication

of time and the devotion in bettering oneself. Suddenly acquiring it at no price whatsoever lacked a sense of propriety to it. Rather, their way of doing it felt somewhat cold to me. Perhaps that was why a sudden thought came to mind.

Does this power of ours really come at no cost? If we're saviors of this world precisely because we pay no price, then what kind of logic drives this?

I couldn't come up with an answer. I didn't know anything about this mysterious power within me. Why was I brought to this world and given the power to tame monsters? I had no idea. It made me feel insecure. The chill I felt sent a small shiver throughout my body.



After giving our tour guides some vague excuse, I took Lily and left for our room. The tour itself was already over, so my goal was pretty much accomplished. I wasn't that interested in watching the soldiers train to begin with, and joining in with the other students would bring me nothing but emotional pain.

Moreover, I had yet to tell anyone I could strengthen my own body with mana. It was best to keep my cards hidden whenever possible. Participating in this training would be counterproductive to that, which made me want to participate less and less.

"Oh, Takahiro, Miho."

A voice greeted us immediately after we left the training ground. A familiar elven knight was walking down the hallway toward us.

"Is something the matter? I heard the plan for today was to provide a tour of the fortress and observe the soldiers train."

"It is, but Mizushima started to feel a little sick in the middle of the training." I resorted to the excuse we had prepared earlier as I pointed to Lily, who was leaning against my arm with her head hung low.

"Is that so? That won't do," she replied with a worried frown.

"I think she was affected by the feverish training. We didn't have much to do with this sort of thing before. I'm sure she'll get better once we get back to our

room. How about you, Lieutenant Shiran? I see you're not wearing your armor today."

Shiran was wearing a military uniform much like she was during yesterday's party, but she wasn't carrying anything aside from the sword at her waist. I had assumed that soldiers and knights would be fully equipped at all times within a castle, but apparently that wasn't the case.

"Our mission as knights is to suppress the monsters forcing their way through the forest. We are not always equipped when in the fortress itself. The soldiers affiliated with the army have a duty to maintain, manage, and defend the castle."

Duties between the knights and the army were segregated. I didn't even need to think of the over-compartmentalized systems of our world to see how this sort of organization was to avoid unnecessary friction between groups.

"Besides, I have just returned from a long mission, so I have been permitted to go unequipped."

"Oh, so it's your day off today? So why are you here...?"

There was a boy following behind Shiran. He wasn't from this world; he was a student like me. This was the bullied kid who had been together with the blond delinquent Sakagami Gouta. If I remembered right...

"Kudou Riku, was it? Why are you here?"

The timid-looking underclassman with a thin face averted his gaze, so Shiran answered in his stead. "I found him in a separate block of the fortress a little ways from here. I was in the middle of guiding him to where everyone was gathered."

In short, he was lost. I'd seen Sakagami during the tour, but I didn't see Kudou. I'd thought he wasn't participating due to poor health, but that wasn't the case.

"Um, Lieutenant Shiran," Kudou said as he raised his head, "the training ground is right here, so I'll be fine on my own now."

"Very well, sir. Then allow me to excuse myself here." Shiran gave Kudou a

bow and then turned toward me. “Oh yes, Takahiro, are you on your way back to your room?”

“That’s the plan.”

“If you have the time, sir, then how about I answer your questions regarding this world?”

“Would you? I’d really appreciate it.”

I managed to get a lot of good information from Mikihiko yesterday, but I still needed to gather more. I planned to ask Shiran, or someone else if she was busy, about this world once I got back to my room, so this saved me the effort.

“I’m interested in the history of saviors and runestones. It would be a great help if you could tell me about them.”

“Very well, sir. I will drop by your room shortly after.” Shiran clicked her heels together with a bow before turning around and taking her leave.

“Um...”

As I watched her blonde ponytail sway behind her, a voice called out to me from the side. Kudou was looking at me.

“Are you not participating in the training, Senpai?”

I didn’t let it show on my face, but I found this rather unexpected. During our journey to Fort Tilia, Kudou didn’t open his mouth even once, aside from when he introduced himself. It was surprising that he’d show any interest in me.

“I don’t plan to,” I answered.

Kudou looked down at the floor. “I see...”

What was going on? I exchanged glances with Lily. Was Kudou perhaps reluctant to participate in the training, much like I was? Or did he find us strange for acting differently from the other students? In any case, something about us attracted his interest. If not, a guy with this kind of personality wouldn’t speak to people he didn’t know.

“Um—”

“Oh hey, it’s Kudou.”

Just as Kudou was about to say something, a rude voice cut him off from behind. Kudou's expression clouded over in an instant.

"Aren't you a little late for the show here?"

It was the boy with bleached hair, Sakagami Gouta. The other students, led by General Greene, were also coming out into the hallway from the training ground. It seemed they had finished observing the soldiers' training while I was speaking with Shiran and Kudou. But they were headed in a different direction. Sakagami was the only one coming toward us.

"What happened? Don't tell me you got lost or something."

"Huh? That's..."

"What? You got a problem?"

"...No, not really. It's...nothing."

Watching Sakagami put on airs, a filthy grin on his face, I somehow got a read on the situation. Shiran said she found Kudou after he'd gotten lost. Sakagami was undoubtedly the reason for this. I didn't know what exactly he'd done, but it was definitely something stupid.

"The hell you staring at, Senpai?" Sakagami said upon noticing my gaze.

I wasn't meaning to stare, but that's how Sakagami interpreted it. Actually, it felt like he was looking for an excuse to pick a fight. Maybe he just didn't like how I was walking around with a girl. Even when we were on our way to Fort Tilia, he shot irritated glances at us every now and then.

What should I do...? Doing something as conspicuous as getting in a fight wasn't a great idea, seeing as how I was the one hiding things, but...

Just then, the situation began moving in a different direction.

"Something going on here?"

The exploration team, who left the training ground a little behind the other students, noticed us. Juumonji was the one to speak. He was supposed to have sparred against several soldiers just moments ago, but he didn't have a single bead of sweat on him.

“Is there a problem here?” he asked Sakagami as he narrowed his gaze.

“...No. Nothing.”

Sakagami quietly backed down, shrugging his shoulders with a bored expression. It seemed he had no intention of picking a fight with the exploration team.

“Hey, get your ass over here already, Kudou.”

“R-Right...”

As Sakagami walked past us, he clicked his tongue and glared at me, perhaps as a final show of harassment. Lily narrowed her gaze ever so slightly as she leaned against me. I calmed her down with a tap to the hand she had placed on my chest. I was also displeased, but this guy was small game. There was no point in paying him any attention. It would actually be counterproductive if it led to revealing our secrets.

“You’d be better off staying away from that guy,” Watanabe said to Kudou as he watched Sakagami walk off with an irritated expression. “We’ll warn him about it later too.”

“...Thank you.”

Kudou bowed and then jogged over to Sakagami. Watanabe’s words didn’t seem to get through to him.

“What a pain,” Juumonji said with a sigh. “This is a time where we need to join forces, so why’s he trying to keep things exactly as they were back home?”

I could see a hint of irritation on Juumonji’s face. The exploration team had worries of their own. Even if they were filled with charisma from their coincidentally gifted powers, it wasn’t all that easy to unite people.

“By the way, what’re you two doing here?” he asked, as if just now noticing us. “You know everyone’s heading over to the knights for training, right?”

“Aah... We’re not participating.”

“What? Why?” Juumonji looked absolutely shocked. There was even a hint of criticism in his tone.

Now I understood why Mikihiko was so pissed off when he spoke about this during breakfast. It was a pain just talking with them when they threw around this thoughtless virtuousness so casually. It was better for me to bring this conversation to an end as quickly as possible and take my leave.

I decided to use my promise with Shiran. “Sorry, I’ve got a prior arrangement to keep. Excuse us.”

I began walking away with Lily in tow. Juumonji grimaced, but I pretended not to notice.

“Hey, wait a sec.” And yet things developed in a completely unexpected manner. “Sorry Juumonji, Watanabe. I’ve got some business here. Can you two go on ahead?”

It was the lone girl in their group, the Skanda lino Yuna.

Juumonji looked somewhat taken aback by her unexpected behavior, but he gave her a nod. “S-Sure... But don’t be late for training.”

“The word ‘late’ doesn’t exist in my vocabulary,” lino replied jokingly.

With her two comrades-in-arms gone, the only ones left here were Lily, lino, and myself.

“Okay then,” lino said. I discreetly put myself on guard, but she didn’t turn to me. Her business had to do with Lily...or rather, with “Mizushima Miho.” “Long time no see, Mizushima. We haven’t really talked all that much, but do you remember me?”

“Of course. We haven’t spoken at all since coming here, right?”

lino was a second-year student, the same as Mizushima Miho and me. I’d never once spoken with her though. I’d recognized her since we were in the same grade, but I couldn’t actually match a name to her face back in school. However, Mizushima Miho and her were both girls, so they had apparently at least talked to each other back then.

I assumed she’d gone out of her way to stop us so she could greet Mizushima, but I immediately realized something odd. lino actually looked interested in me. She shot a glance my way as she let out a long sigh.

“Hmmm, how pitiful.”

That’s quite the greeting... Was she picking a fight? Not that I had any intention of being provoked.

“Oh, no, don’t get me wrong. I’m not talking about you,” lino said as she waved her hands about in a flurry before returning her gaze to Lily. “You know Takaya Jun, right? He’s one grade lower.”

Lily’s eyes shot open at this. That was the name of Mizushima Miho’s childhood friend in the exploration team.

“Takaya is alive,” lino said with a smile. “I thought I should let you know.”

“Meaning, the one who informed the first expeditionary force at Fort Ebenus about the Colony’s destruction really was...” Lily replied as she trailed off.

“Yup. It was Takaya.”

Mizushima Miho’s childhood friend had gone east to get help from the expeditionary force. Katou had told us of this before. He must have been successful...or not. The person he wanted to save by doing so, Mizushima Miho, was already dead. By the time he reached the expeditionary force, it was already meaningless.

“Takaya asked me to protect you if I happened to find you, seeing how I already knew you. I guess you didn’t need saving in the end, though.”

“...Where is he now?”

“He stayed behind in Fort Ebenus. Looks like he was pushing it getting through the Woodlands all on his own. His body was quite a mess. He was persistent, but he wouldn’t have been able to keep up with us in his state. So it’ll be a little longer before he comes this way.”

It was pretty easy to guess what our relationship was upon seeing “Mizushima Miho” nestled up against me like this. The truth was a little different, but this was definitely a cruel development for Takaya Jun regardless.

“Anyway, that’s all I had to say. I’m glad we got a chance to talk before I leave,” lino said as if a weight had been lifted off her mind.

“Thanks for letting me know, lino,” Lily said, responding with a smile and a

small bow of the head. “By the way, what do you mean by leaving?”

“Hm? You don’t know? The second rescue operation into the Woodlands is leaving within the day. I’ll be going along. We plan to go around a few huts in the Depths and, if we have the time, drop by the Colony.”

I heard about this from Mikihiko yesterday. It had only been a day since Shiran came back and they were already setting off. As one would expect of the Skanda, the swift-footed deity, Iino was quick to take action.

“Oh. But don’t worry. We don’t want the students staying behind to feel anxious, so Juumonji and Watanabe are going to stay too.”

“So you’re not all going together?”

“I’m more than capable enough on my own in terms of combat strength. Actually, it’d be faster if I was completely on my own...but you never know what could happen in the Woodlands, so the knights objected. Juumonji and Watanabe were also whining about coming along.”

Iino shrugged. Her behavior didn’t convey a single hint that she was about to dive into danger. There was no need for her to feel threatened, after all. I recalled the battle I saw—or didn’t see—against the bull wrigglers. Her title of Skanda wasn’t just for show. Iino Yuna’s combat abilities were on an entirely different level. There was a beauty to it. Just like how a hero should be. That was why the other students and the people of this world looked to her with hope in their eyes, while Mikihiko looked at her with disgust.

“Oops. Look at the time. Sorry, Mizushima. I’ve got to get going.” Realizing she had gotten too caught up in the conversation, Iino turned on her heels. “See you later.”

Chapter 5: The Elf's Circumstances

Shiran dropped by our room a short while after we got there ourselves.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Takahiro, Miho," she said as she clicked her heels together and lowered her head.

Lily, who got the door much like she had when Mikihiko visited, ushered her in.

"Don't be. Thank you for going out of your way to come here despite it being your day off," I told her.

"There's no need for your concern, sir. Even on a day of rest, there's naught to do but train out here in the Woodlands. Besides, being of use to an esteemed savior like this is a great honor."

"...Well, no use in standing around as we talk. Please, come in."

Shiran's speech was as formal as always. It made it somewhat difficult to speak with her, but what could I do about that?

"Pardon me."

"P-P-Pardon the intrusion."

A girl followed Shiran into the room. She had blonde hair and blue eyes just like Shiran. Pointy ears peeked out from her hair. She looked to be a few years younger than me. Her face was fraught with tension, but otherwise, it was quite similar to Shiran's. Maybe they were sisters. In all likelihood, she would grow up to be a beauty like Shiran, but right now her youth was far more prominent. She wore a stiff-looking military uniform which didn't suit her age, and she held a small basket in front of her.

"This girl is Kei. She is the one responsible for waiting on my needs. Kei, please introduce yourself."

"Y-Yes, Shiran." Kei bowed her head in what looked like a nervous breakdown as her white cheeks flushed red. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance,

sir.”

“Yeah, best regards. Also...it’d be easier for me if you didn’t act so nervous.”

There was furniture in the room, but unfortunately there were only two chairs. I sat down on the bed next to Lily while gesturing our guests toward the chairs.

“Please take a seat.”

“There’s no need. We will remain as we are.”

Shiran stood at attention a good distance from us. The girl called Kei was also standing perfectly upright in a tense manner right behind her.

“Um... Lieutenant Shiran,” I said, reflexively putting my palm to my forehead in exasperation. This really had to be said before we got anywhere.

“What is it, sir?”

“Could you relax a bit?” Unfortunately, I didn’t have the disposition to speak calmly with someone who was standing at attention like that. To put it bluntly, it was a pain. I felt like I was being harassed in some roundabout manner.

“Please, take a seat. Also, could you not speak to me in such an exaggerated manner? We’re not all that different in age. So please just act as you normally would.”

“I cannot comply with such a request, sir,” she answered. I didn’t expect that reply. “If anything, please do not feel obliged to treat one such as I with such careful consideration.” On the contrary, Shiran had things to say about my behavior. “Please refer to me as Shiran. There is no need for the ‘Lieutenant.’”

“Mikihiko called the commander by her title, though.”

“The commander is a fair bit older than the rest of us. According to Mikihiko, your world places value on respecting one’s elders. It sounds wonderful.”

It sounded Mikihiko was telling the commander whatever he wanted to get his way. It was pretty typical of him, but it left me in a difficult spot. Unlike Mikihiko, I wasn’t very slick with my words. How was I supposed to convince her otherwise? I couldn’t come up with an answer on the spot.

I exchanged looks with Lily, but she only smiled bitterly back at me. It seemed

we were in the same boat.

Just as I was about to give up, I noticed a crease forming between Shiran's pretty brows. Her blue eyes were staring right at me as her pale lips began to move.

"Does this truly displease you, sir?"

"...Is it that obvious?" I was surprised she pointed it out. I didn't think I'd let it show on my face.

"We elves are sensitive to the subtleties of emotion," Shiran answered with a strained smile.

Behind her, Kei was in a fluster. It would seem she also could sense my displeasure. It looked like it really was easy for them to tell.

"There were those among the saviors who made similar requests of me. However, none among them truly felt displeasure from it like you do."

Shiran's tone didn't hide her bewilderment. From her perspective, it was natural to treat the saviors with reverence. She likely never expected one to refuse such treatment.

I knew I was being overly sensitive on the matter. I didn't like their reverent behavior because I felt psychological disgust in being treated like a hero. If not for that, even if I found it troublesome, I probably wouldn't have felt like I did.

Mikihiko presumably felt the same way regarding Shiran's behavior, but he was better at dealing with these things than me. He didn't let his displeasure show. That was why he was able to so eloquently persuade the commander.

Shiran pondered over it for a while before nodding. "Very well. I have no intention of causing you offense. I shall gratefully accept your offer."

With that, Shiran bowed once, walked through the room, and took a seat. Kei followed behind her while keeping a timid eye on us. Her cheeks were bright red. It felt like she would faint from the tension at any moment. It was possible Shiran complied with my request partially out of consideration for her.

Shiran sat with perfect posture and waited for Kei to take her seat before continuing our conversation. "I shall act in accordance with your will as much as

possible, Takahiro. So in exchange, though it may be presumptuous of me, you may refer to me as Shiran.”

“Got it. Please go ahead and talk to me like you normally would, Shiran.”

“My apologies, but this is how I normally speak.”

So she said, but Shiran’s courteous tone no longer had a sense of pointless exaggeration to it. It was a bit careless of me to let my inner thoughts show so easily, but the result turned out fine.

Now that it was easier for us to talk, I moved on to the reason I invited her here.

“Okay then, I’d like to get right to my questions, if that’s okay.”

“Of course. What would you like to start with?”

“Let’s see... First, can you tell me what exactly the saviors of this world are? I’d also like to hear the legends of previous saviors.”

“The legends of saviors, is it? Very well.”

Quite frankly, I didn’t really need to hear the legends. It wasn’t that I had no interest; it just happened to be a good segue into what I actually wanted to ask about.

“Then let us begin. The first time a savior descended upon this world...”

Shiran’s story was largely the same as Mikihiko’s. About once a century, saviors descended upon this monster-ridden world. Sometimes they would come within fifty years, sometimes it would take over a hundred years, but saviors continued to appear throughout history.

Even discounting us, the many generations of saviors were recorded to have fought the monsters. This was also the history of the conflict between the Woodlands and humanity.

“The forest we refer to as the Woodlands is densely filled with mana. Monsters within the Woodlands largely find their origins in animals. When the first savior arrived, it’s said the Woodlands expanded well beyond here and covered the lands we now inhabit.”

The Woodlands encroached on human territory. When humanity was completely driven into a corner, the first savior descended upon them. According to the legend, the savior led humanity and pushed back the tide of the Woodlands little by little. A village was founded within this new territory which eventually became the foundation of a country.

“There are many splintered fragments of the Woodlands across the world, but the term is mostly used to identify the largest expanse which stretches from the continent’s center to its southern edge. This is the forest we currently find ourselves in.”

Shiran took a break from the legends to tell us more about the Woodlands.

“It’s said that the deeper into the Woodlands one goes, the denser mana overflows, so even more powerful monsters call it home. As a result, it is tremendously dangerous for humanity to set foot within the Woodlands beyond its very extremities. As such, names have been given to regions to quantify how far humans should consider exploring. In short: the Fringes, the Depths, and the Abyss.”

There were several fortresses within the Fringes. Fort Tilia and Fort Ebonus were two such fortresses. Many monsters ran rampant within these lands, but they were just barely within human territory. In contrast, the Depths had no such fortresses. The monsters in that region were so powerful they couldn’t even dispatch workers to construct one. The Depths were so dangerous that even the most elite of knights would find it difficult to venture within and return alive. They were barely able to dot the region with listening posts and install the barrier runestones, but many lives were sacrificed in the process.

And then there was the Abyss. It comprised over half of the Woodland’s total territory. Humans pretty much never went there. There were no listening posts, and they barely knew of the kind of monsters that inhabited the region.

Thinking back on it, when we began our journey north in search of humanity, the types of monsters we encountered changed the further we went. It also felt like our battles got easier and easier. I thought it was because the girls were getting better at working together, but the monsters growing weaker as we got away from the Depths must have been a larger factor.

Incidentally, the Colony was built in the Depths, just a little south of the northern Fringes. When he heard of this, apparently Mikihiko had screamed, “What kind of shitty game is this?!” To put it in gaming terms, it was like being thrown right next to the last dungeon right off the bat, so I understood where he was coming from. It was better than being sent right to the Abyss, though. Even with three hundred cheaters, there was no telling what could’ve happened there.

There were several tales among the legends of brave saviors who challenged the Abyss to protect humanity. And though they accomplished great feats, they did so in exchange for heroic deaths.

These tales were close to myth in this world and grossly overdramatized, so these were likely failed campaigns where the heroes had suffered crushing defeats. As proof of that, the army who used the emblem of the saviors as their banner hadn’t carried out a campaign to completely excise the Woodlands in about five hundred years. The Abyss was basically a land of demons even the saviors had to treat lightly in.

So, didn’t that mean humanity had no way to oppose the Abyss? That obviously wasn’t the case. The mana in the Abyss was proportional to the depth of the forest. In short, by cutting down the trees in the Fringes, the Woodlands itself grew smaller. Therefore, the total size of the Abyss also shrank. Aside from those campaigns into the Abyss, the saviors throughout history fundamentally suppressed monsters in the Fringes, the Depths, and those who leaked out from the Woodlands. By doing so, they helped the people of this world cut down the dangerous forest.



Shiran finished recounting the legends of our most recent predecessor, the savior who died fifty years ago.

“Thank you, Shiran. That was very useful.”

We went through things pretty quickly, so there were some details she skipped, but I still managed to learn about this world’s entire history, at least what related to their saviors. As far as determining how highly they regarded us, this was time well spent.

“In any case, you’re very well-informed about the legends, aren’t you?”

She didn’t look like a scholar, but Shiran was decidedly educated on the matter. She answered my request and explained everything about the saviors to me. It wouldn’t have gone this smoothly if she didn’t have some form of education.

“So, are there schools in this world or something?”

“There are, but I have never attended one. There are chapels built by the Holy Church in most every village where they teach children about the legends of the saviors.”

This Holy Church Shiran referred to was a religious organization that revered the saviors as living gods. Meaning they really did see us as targets of religious faith here. My impression of how they treated visitors was basically right.

The Holy Church took on the role of supporting any saviors who descended upon the world. To fulfill that, they formed an independent armed force called the Holy Order. Knights of the Holy Order showed up several times within the legends. Normally, the saviors fought side by side with the Holy Order. This time, however, the exploration team was prioritizing the rescue of survivors in the Woodlands, so they still hadn’t rendezvoused with the knights far off in the imperial capital.

If what Shiran said was true, that pretty much all villages had chapels in them, it meant the religious faith in saviors permeated this entire world. The church’s influence was sure to be enormous.

“That’s quite impressive. Did you also hear these stories in the chapel, Kei?” I asked the girl accompanying Shiran.

Her soft cheeks turned red as an apple. She looked like she could faint at any moment, so I tried to include her to help dispel the tension. It might’ve had the opposite effect, however.

“Fwah?!”

Perhaps because she didn’t think she would be brought into the conversation, Kei nearly jumped right out of her seat. The basket on her lap went flying.

“H-Hwawawawawawa!”

Kei caught the basket with both hands before it could spill its contents.

“Y-Y-Y-Y-Yes! I also, um... Uh...”

As far as I could tell from her incoherent response, she didn’t even know what she was trying to say herself. She was far too nervous. I could almost hear her heart thumping away.

“Calm yourself, Kei,” Shiran said with a sigh as she put her palm to her forehead. “My apologies, Takahiro. Please forgive Kei’s shameful behavior.”

“It’s fine. I don’t really mind.”

It was probably better not to carelessly talk to her. I was afraid she might have a nervous breakdown if I did. But even though the situation was uncomfortable, I mostly felt sorry for her.

“Now that I think of it, you said you also had an interest in magic technology, correct?” Shiran asked, probably changing the topic to shake off the delicate atmosphere.

Shiran looked pointedly at Kei. The young girl didn’t seem to understand why, but Shiran gestured to what was in her lap.

Kei opened the basket in a fluster. Within were stones of every shape, size, and color laying atop a piece of cloth.

“These are runestones,” Shiran said.

“You brought them all the way here?” I did ask about this before, but I didn’t think she would bring some. “Can I touch one?”

“By all means.”

I picked up a blue stone about the size of my palm. It had a complicated pattern etched into its smooth surface. While I scrutinized the stone further, Shiran began to explain.

“There are many kinds of runestones. All of them work by passing mana through them. The one you’re holding now is etched with water magic. Runestones aren’t only used for manifesting the same effects as magic, though;

there are also many tools which make use of them. Kei, show him.”

“Y-Yes.”

Kei, her hands trembling, pulled the runestones out of the basket. Then she set the cloth down on the table and lined up several tools.

“What’s this container?” I asked.

“A self-filling flask. There is a water runestone set within it. When you pour mana into it, the flask fills with water.”

“And this sack? It looks like it has a lot of small runestones all over it.”

“That’s a magic pouch. It has an increased capacity, and it preserves its contents.”

“How about this finger-sized cylinder?”

“That’s a lighter. It creates fire.”

I was honestly surprised by the lineup of useful tools. This world was more technologically advanced than I thought. They even had several tools that were impossible to create with Japan’s modern technology. Considering they had a device capable of real-time translation, it wasn’t possible to say which world was more advanced.

“Are tools like this widespread?” I asked.

“Depending on the tool, even the masses make use of them. However, the majority are scarce and quite expensive. There are established manufacturing lines for simple elemental magic types, but when the effect is more specific, it sometimes requires high-purity stones and a specialized artisan to carve them.”

“Now that you mention it, you did say before that the manufacturing method for barrier runestones was lost.”

“Also, some runestones can only be used after specialist training.”

“Are these you brought usable by anyone?” I asked as I pointed to the runestones on the table.

Shiran nodded. “Illumination and water runestones can be used by anyone who can manipulate mana. In fact, runestones were initially developed for

those who can't use magic."

"So, the ones that require specialist training would be something like the translation runestone?"

"You know of them? Would you like to see one?"

Shiran put her hand to the back of her neck. She pulled up a thin chain from under her collar, revealing a red runestone about as big as a ring.

"It's smaller than I expected."

"Even though it affects everything within a certain range, it requires its carrier to be around at all times. Incidentally, although it is small, just one of these costs a small fortune. This one was loaned out for the rescue mission of the esteemed saviors."

Meaning it was difficult to acquire one. Not that there was any use in getting one if I couldn't use it.

"You said it requires training to use, but what about other runestones?"

"Some runestones, much like translation runestones, do not actually manifest magic. Rather, they are used to control a portion of magic as an aid. That's why using these types of runestones isn't all that different from learning magic."

"I see."

"The saviors are always accompanied by those who support them, so you shouldn't need to learn how to use them, Takahiro."

That would normally be the case. But it would be awfully inconvenient for me as someone who wanted to act independently. It was somewhat vexing, but being too obstinate about this could arouse suspicion. If it was known I was thinking of getting out of here, the questions as to why would be a pain to deal with. It was best to step back here.

"Thanks. I was just a little curious."

Shiran tucked the translation runestone back into her clothes. It felt rude to stare at her while she did so, so I casually averted my gaze. Just then, something yellow entered my vision. I took this opportunity to ask the other thing that had been on my mind.

“Oh yeah, is that thing floating next to you also some form of magic technology?”

I had been curious about it for quite a while. Just like before, a mysterious yellow sphere shone above Shiran’s shoulder. The round, clay doll-looking thing casually bobbed up and down as it always did. It clearly had a hint of magic to it. Was it a product of this world’s magic technology? That was my guess, at least. And seeing that we were at a good stopping point for our previous topic, I decided it was the right time to ask.



“Huh? You can see spirits, sir?” Kei asked in a surprised manner. “...Ah.”

It seemed she didn’t realize she had asked me a question until after she actually said it. Kei had been pretty tense this whole time, but now she was completely frozen. She stared down at her hands clenched atop her lap and hid her face.

Shiran looked at her with a strained smile and then turned back toward me as I stared on in bewilderment.

“Takahiro, can you see this child floating by my side?”

“...What do you mean?”

“This is a being we call a spirit.”

Shiran held out her palm and the bobbing yellow sphere—the spirit—floated over lazily. It touched her fingers with its short arms.

No...they’re not touching... I could see its arms ever so slightly sinking into her fingers. The spirit didn’t have a corporeal body.

“To be more precise, this is a sprite. It is impossible to see them without a special sense we call spirit sight. We elves possess such sight from birth, but only a small fraction of regular humans who excel at magic can see spirits. Are you perhaps able to manipulate mana?”

“That’s...”

Crap. It was already too late. I didn’t know most humans couldn’t see them. I was being careless.

“I can... Um, just a little.”

I was going to immediately deny it, but I reconsidered based on this information. Manipulating mana was apparently the minimum requirement for spirit-sight. Denying it now would cause problems later on. Besides, my ability to use mana wasn’t considerable. Admitting it here wouldn’t be a problem. On the contrary, if I poorly hid it by lying, I would eventually slip up. Then others would realize I’d been hiding my abilities. That would be bad.

“I learned it back in the Colony. Everything else is self-taught.”

“I see. That makes sense. This must also be how you managed to survive in the Woodlands.”

Shiran came to her own conclusion, so I remained silent. It was convenient for me, so I didn't bother to object.

“Having said that, I can't do much. I can't use any magic. All I can do is strengthen myself a little.”

After explaining that my abilities were severely limited, I returned my gaze to the lazily floating spirit.

“So, even spirits exist here,” I said.

“It is said that spirits are mana taken form. A contract with a spirit is a special magic only we elves are capable of. By contracting with a specific spirit, we can borrow their power. Those who wield such techniques are called spiritualists. Incidentally, this child was the one who told me you were hiding nearby when we were taking a rest.”

“Oh. So you didn't realize it yourself?”

“Elves possess sharper senses than regular humans, but there was still no way I could have spotted you hidden within such a dense forest. You were too far away to sense by presence, too. It might have been a different story for the esteemed members of the exploration team, however.” Shiran's lips spread into a bittersweet smile. “Back then, this child told me, ‘Someone is watching us.’”

Thinking back on it, Shiran had looked up at the spirit floating above her right before the bull wriggler attack in front of the fortress. Meaning this spirit had given her a warning back then, too.

“Spirits do not perceive the world through regular eyes,” Shiran continued as she drew her hand back. “One theory hypothesizes they see the world through mana. That's why this child could see you hidden in such a dense forest. Sometimes monsters will launch ambushes within the Woodlands, so I asked the sprite to inform me if anything looked like it was watching us from a hidden position. You just happened to match those conditions.”

“I see. That's amazing.”

“Having said that, they are only able to give a warning exactly as requested. You still must use caution. We spiritualists can’t freely communicate with spirits like we can with other humans. It makes dealing with them somewhat difficult. This has nothing to do with the spirits themselves, though. It’s a problem with us spiritualists. But we recognize that spirits are terrific neighbors.”

I nodded along as Shiran happily spoke of spirits. My cheeks started to cramp from the fake smile I had plastered on my face. I was toeing a very dangerous line here. According to Shiran, spirits didn’t perceive the world through regular eyes. Meaning, when I first met Shiran, this sprite probably saw Rose and the others too.

No, not only that, it probably saw Asarina, hidden under the bandage on my left arm, as well as Ayame, who was hiding in Lily’s body. It simply wasn’t telling Shiran about them because she didn’t ask.

“...”

The spirit lazily spun around in the air as always. Its face had nothing resembling an expression on it, so I couldn’t determine if my suspicions were right.

“Spirits and spiritualists, huh?”

It was a little frightening, but excessively worrying over it wouldn’t do anything. I forced my mind to change gears. Besides, this was a good time to ask Shiran about something else.

“Oh yeah, Shiran. There’s something else that’s been on my mind.”

“What would that be?” Shiran asked as she cocked her head.

“There are spiritualists who can command spirits, so are there also people who can command monsters?”

This was something I absolutely had to find out. My cheat allowed me to tame monsters. If nobody else in this world could do something similar, I would be attacked on the spot if I entered a town with monsters in tow.

Conversely, if such people did exist in this world, I would no longer have a reason to hide my ability. I don’t know if I would reveal Lily’s identity, but Rose

and Gerbera could come closer to the fortress, and depending on the circumstances, even come inside.

Unfortunately, Shiran's legends didn't mention anyone accompanied by monsters. Neither the saviors themselves nor any of those who fought with them were described as such. It was still possible, but it was rather unlikely.

"In our world, though it's restricted to fiction, there are stories where humans can tame monsters," I continued, pretending it was out of mere curiosity. "So, if there's a technique to make use of spirits, then is there maybe a similar technique for—"

"They're different!"

An empathic interjection cut me off and left me staring in shock. The one who screamed at me was Kei, who had up until now remained entirely stiff. She vigorously shot up from her chair, slammed her hands against the table, and sent several runestones tumbling to the floor. She showed no signs of even noticing her behavior as she continued yelling.

"Spirits are different from monsters! They're different! So please don't mislabel them like that!"

She had been extremely quiet earlier, but now she was unbelievably menacing. I was completely taken aback. I didn't understand what had her so frantic. Kei's face was red with an emotion other than nervousness. It wasn't anger. Rather, her expression was like that of a child on the verge of crying.

"Please understand, sir! We... We're not traitors!"

"Kei!" Shiran yelled in a strong tone, a tone I could feel on my very skin.

"...Ah." That brought Kei back to her senses. Her red complexion turned white as a sheet. She realized she was yelling at me—at one of the saviors.

"My..." Kei dropped to her knees with extreme force. "My deepest apologies!"

"..."

She lowered her head all the way to the ground. I didn't know her exact age, but she didn't look that much older than ten. And here she was prostrating

herself before me. Was this some kind of punishment? I was getting a headache.

“I’m not angry, so please raise your head,” I told her.

Kei remained with her head pressed against the floor. Her small shoulders trembled violently. It was painful to look at. Nobody with any amount of empathy would be able to take this.

“Shiran, you say something too,” I said, trying to get her to help.

“...Takahiro is saying he is not angry, Kei. Take your seat. You mustn’t trouble him like this.”

Kei timidly raised her head. “Understood,” she said hesitantly, and then she sluggishly returned to her seat. She looked like a criminal who had just been given the death sentence.

Shiran deeply bowed her head, her face pale as well. “My deepest apologies for her behavior.”

You too...? I guess this is normal in this world. That’s exactly what it means to be a savior... It was honestly rather depressing.

“I shall accept any punishment you deem fit. So, please show mercy for Kei’s impolite behavior.”

“Sh-Shiran?!” Kei yelped.

“I’m telling you I don’t care,” I said, sighing. I was getting fed up.

I was trying to get a grasp on this kind of behavior based on yesterday’s events, but I was utterly sick of the exaggerated treatment we were getting here. Couldn’t I at least have a proper conversation without any of this?

“I’m begging you, please raise your head. Also, could you explain what’s going on here in a way even I can understand?”

Shiran finally raised her head. “Very well.”

Feeling relieved, I moved things along.

“So, what’s going on here? I don’t get it at all.”

“That’s, um...”

Shiran was being uncharacteristically inarticulate. It was apparently something she didn't want to talk about. But I had to cut to the chase here. Things spun out of control just from asking about commanding monsters. I couldn't possibly leave empty-handed. I wasn't going to get anywhere by waiting.

"Kei said, 'we're not traitors,' didn't she? Does that mean you two have been treated like traitors before?"

"It's not really us..." Shiran replied in Kei's stead, seeing as the younger girl looked dead inside, but she was avoiding the point.

"You also said, 'spirits are different from monsters,' right?" Lily said, joining the conversation. "Are there people who believe spirits and monsters are the same? And treat you as traitors because of it? So, basically, spiritualists are traitors, and so is the entire race of elves they come from?"

Shiran didn't answer. She just averted her gaze in silence.

"Why would it end up like that...?" I muttered.

"...Takahiro. It may not strike a chord with you, seeing that you come from a world where monsters do not exist. But in our world, the threat posed by monsters is greater than anything else." Shiran turned back to look at me, giving in. "This is a story from long ago. In truth, there is nothing out there that disputes it. Kei said spirits and monsters are different, but we can't say what is different about them. The only thing we know is that spirits mean us no harm..."

Monsters were creatures who possessed mana. Spirits were mana taken form. The two didn't seem all that different based on that. In fact, it was possible they were the same. From my view, that was where the discussion ended. But that wasn't the case for the people of this world.

"People who consort with monsters. Traitors to humanity. Enemies from within who have snuck in to destroy us... There are none who say such things publicly anymore. However, it's a historical fact that we elves were once persecuted for such a reason. Unfortunately, we're still held in low regard to this very day."

In short, their race was once discriminated against. But if it were only a matter of the past, Kei's extreme reaction was strange. They were probably still discriminated against, be it in tangible or intangible ways. Now that I knew the circumstances, an example of this exact discrimination came to mind. Even after hearing the legends of all the previous saviors throughout history, I hadn't known that spiritualists existed until just a moment ago. No spiritualist elf showed up in any of the heroic tales.

"...I understand," I said.

Kei jolted and trembled at my words. Shiran's eyes were also colored by a stifling fear. Seeing them like this, that fed-up feeling within me grew even heavier.

These two won't understand me unless I put it clear as day.

"I'll tell you once more," I said as I gazed straight into Shiran's eyes, "I'm not angry. So there's no need to apologize."

"Takahiro..."

Shiran returned my gaze. Her blue eyes probed deep into mine. Before long, she gradually relaxed. Then her beautiful face was colored with bashfulness, probably because she felt bad for doubting me. Shiran had mentioned earlier that elves were sensitive to the feelings of others. She observed my behavior and was now convinced I was speaking from the heart. That's what finally brought her some relief. I was glad for it.

"I understand why you reacted like that, Kei. With such circumstances, anyone would get frantic. I'm sorry for asking you something so insensitive."

Kei, who looked as if she had shrunk, shook her head so vigorously I could practically hear her hair swishing about.

"Th-That's not necessary, sir. It's true I said something extremely rude..."

"Don't worry about it. If you want to worry about something, then cut out the 'sir' stuff. That bothers me far more."

Kei looked quite troubled. Elves were sensitive to the feelings of others. If so, she could definitely tell I really didn't like it.

“So, how do I address you?”

“You can just use my name.”

“I couldn’t possibly... Um, T-Takahiro? I-Is that fine?”

“Yeah. That’s fine.”

I nodded back to her. Kei finally smiled without any of that awkward air about her. This was the first time I saw her smile since we met. I returned a smile of my own. With this, things between us would probably be fine, for now at least.

The problem now is me. I was honestly at a loss. There were no other monster tamers in this world, it seemed. Elves were discriminated against because spirits were treated as monsters. Meaning someone like me, who consorted with actual monsters, would be wholly rejected. Now I knew I absolutely couldn’t let anyone know of my cheat. I might be treated differently by the elves, considering my status as a savior, but I couldn’t act under the pretext of wishful thinking.

“Majima.”

Lily’s voice brought me back from my pondering.

“Hm? Oh, sorry. I zoned out a bit there.”

“If you are tired, then we can take our leave here,” Shiran said out of consideration. “Is there anything else you would like to ask me about?”

“No, I’m not really tired or anything. Let’s see, what else...”

I felt like I asked everything I wanted to already. Was there anything else?

“Come on, how about those rings? Isn’t this a good chance to hand them over?” Lily said, throwing me a lifeline.

“Oh, those. Right. Let’s do that now.”

I stood up from the bed, went to my backpack laying in the corner, and took out a bunch of rings tied together by a string. They were the rings we had retrieved from the ghouls who attacked us. I had completely forgotten about them.

I had already seen that Shiran was wearing a similar ring, although hers was a

different color. The gems inlaid in the corpses' rings were yellow. In contrast, Shiran's ring had a blue gem. From what I could recall, the ghouls were wearing the same armor and equipment as the knights Shiran commanded. A difference in the color could simply indicate a difference in units or something. In any case, she would know what to do with these.

As I handed the rings over to her, Shiran's eyes shot wide open in shock.

"I do believe these belong to members of our Third Company. Where did you find them?" she asked.

"We saw some corpses while wandering around the Woodlands. I couldn't really bring the bodies with me, so I thought I'd at least carry these as a memento for the fallen."

"...Is that so? Thank you very much," Shiran said, frowning. Her expression was pained. "Those likely belong to the detached force we sent ahead as outriders on our rescue mission. They were clearing the way ahead of us to make our passage as safe as possible. I heard they came across a pack of monsters and fell. There were those among them whose corpses we were unable to retrieve, but..."

Shiran gazed at the rings with a downcast expression.

"Takahiro. Though it may be ill-mannered of me, I have a request for you," she said, pausing for a few seconds before raising her head. "Could you participate in their memorial service with us?"

Chapter 6: The Story Told in the Mausoleum

I was a little perplexed by Shiran's request that I participate in the deceased knights' memorial service. But after hearing about the circumstances, I decided to accept.

"Then please excuse us."

Shiran took Kei along to handle the required procedures for the service. She recommended we have a meal in the meantime. The preparations weren't going to take all that long, so we decided to do just that, have a little rest, and then find an appropriate time to visit Shiran.

She arranged for our meal to be brought to our room. After finishing our food, I went over the situation with Lily as I kept an eye on Asarina and Ayame as they relaxed in the now-empty room. Lily sat in the chair Shiran had used while I sat in the other chair facing her.

"Our plan from here is to keep your ability hidden and obtain a translation runestone," Lily started. "We can learn how to use it after leaving the fortress. Then we need to find a village or town where they don't know you're a visitor from afar, secure provisions and a supply route, and find somewhere safe for Katou. Is that all?"

Lily counted everything we had to do on her fingers and looked at me with upturned eyes.

"Yeah. After that, we either seclude ourselves somewhere remote, or at worst, return to the Woodlands."

"Hmm. That sounds kinda hard," Lily said with a groan as she scrunched up her face. I was of the same opinion. "Just to check," she added as she held out her slender hand, "there's one simple way of resolving this troublesome situation, but I assume you're not going to use it, right?" Lily's hand turned transparent and lost its contour. "If we can find the corpse of a local, we can get an interpreter right away."

Her slimy feeler swayed around in front of my eyes, but I shook my head.

“No eating people to learn their language.”

“Thought so. Mm. I just thought I’d mention it.”

I would’ve asked Lily to eat the dead ghouls if that choice was an option. I also could have asked her to eat all the corpses of the exploration and home team members we found along the way, starting with Kaga. But I chose not to do so.

This thought had crossed my mind back when we killed Kaga, but Lily’s predation and mimicry bore some amount of risk. Her abilities were amazing. She could imitate everything about her prey. It wasn’t just their outward appearance; she reproduced their looks, abilities, and even their thoughts. However, it looked to me like Lily was influenced to some extent by Mizushima Miho after eating her.

Eating monsters who possessed no egos was one thing, but eating humans came with the risk of being influenced by them. Learning a language by doing so was great and all, but I didn’t want to lose the Lily I knew in the process. I could say the same of all my servants. No matter what happened, I had no intention of losing a single one of them, tangibly or otherwise. I didn’t just want to survive. I wanted to live in this world together with them.

“You’re my main worry, but there are other problems. For example, we might earn their ire by eating one of their kin, even if it was a corpse... Well, it might be a little late for that one, though.”

I was already a giant target for their animosity just by being a monster tamer. They couldn’t hold back the Woodlands without the saviors from other worlds, but making enemies of them wasn’t a low-level risk.

Considering they were the ones protecting humanity, even if they didn’t have the power to do it themselves, they were still much larger than our small group. If we were to openly oppose them, we’d be forced into a hopeless battle.

I also had to consider the possibility of my identity being revealed. I couldn’t spoil any potential negotiations we might have. Eating humans was far too risky in that sense.

“Even if we can clear all our objectives, the problem is the amount of time it’ll

probably take,” I said.

“Mrr. Right. I’m worried about what Gerbera will do if we stay here too long. If she loses control and gets too close, and Shiran’s spirit finds her...”

“Stop. I feel like it’ll actually happen if you say it aloud.”

We were all thinking the same thing. Even Ayame was yipping. I wondered how they were doing. Were they keeping quiet? I was especially worried about Gerbera.

“Well, it’s not like we need to do something about it right away,” I said as I shook my head and changed gears. “We were planning on spending a few days gathering information anyway. Let’s go with that for now.”

“Mm. Got it,” Lily replied with a nod.

“Still, this whole situation is difficult,” I said with a bitter smile. “The two of us will have to figure out a way to overcome all of this together.”

“The two of us, huh? Mm. Right.”

For some reason, Lily cast her eyes to the floor.

“Lily?”

Her reaction was strange. I cocked my head wondering what was wrong with her.

“You know what, Master?” she said in a hesitant manner.

“What? Did you think of something?”

“No, never mind. It’s nothing.” Lily shook her head and then flashed a grand smile. “Quite a bit of time has passed, so it should be fine to go see Shiran now.”

Now that she mentioned it, we’d spent a fair amount of time talking here. We would end up keeping Shiran waiting at this rate.

“Yeah, you’re right. Let’s get going.”

I rose to my feet and grabbed the bandage I had left on my bed. I tied it around my left arm to hide Asarina as I turned to Lily.

“By the way, let me know if you think of anything. You’re the only one I can count on right now.”

“Okay already,” Lily said with a smile as she hid Ayame under her clothes. “Come on, let’s go, Master.”



I went down the corridors using the path Shiran had informed me of beforehand. After arriving at the correct room, I knocked on the door and entered. I had been told this was one of the rooms used by the Alliance Knights. There was a line of plain wooden tables with mountains of paper on top of them.

Shiran spotted us and came running over. Kei was also behind her.

“Pardon me, Takahiro, Miho. The formalities for the memorial service are done, but we have yet to acquire the commander’s approval,” she said with a sad look.

“Is there a problem?”

“The commander isn’t currently present. Normally, she would return here right after the general assembly, but that’s been over for a while now.”

Just as we were talking, one of the male members of the knights entered the room and walked up to us.

“Lieutenant. If you’re looking for the commander, I saw her at the training ground.”

“Is that so, Marcus? Which one?”

“Number seven. She is training our esteemed saviors. I suppose the Empire invited her after the general assembly. The commander can’t really refuse, considering her position. Good grief, she’s already so busy as it is. It’s rather troublesome.” He apparently had a friendly relationship with Shiran. Everything after that was grumbling. “The main topic of the general assembly was to fill in the Imperial Knights’ shortages on the rescue operation, wasn’t it? We’ve already got it tough dealing with our own vacancies...”

“Understood. Thank you, Marcus.” Shiran cut off the man’s endless

complaints with an air of familiarity and then turned back to me. “Excuse me, Takahiro, Miho. I must go obtain the commander’s approval. Could I ask you to wait back in your... No, it shouldn’t take that long. Perhaps you can...”

“How about we just come with you?” I suggested.

“Would you?”

“Going back and forth will just be a waste of time.”

Shiran gave it some thought and then nodded. “Very well. Then please come with me.”

We ended up following Shiran to the training ground. I tried to ignore the soldier’s gazes as we passed and instead focused on memorizing the layout of the fortress.

“...?”

On the way, it felt like Kei was strangely conscious of me for some reason. Did she need something? Even though she was looking at me, her pointy ears were bright red and she kept her head low. It was probably better not to call her out. It would be problematic if she fainted in the middle of the hallway. It would be even worse if I somehow managed to prompt her to prostrate herself before me again with all these eyes around us.

After going down a few sets of stairs, we arrived at a sand-covered training ground. It was a different room from the one we watched the imperial soldiers train in this morning. There were twenty or so people moving around the training ground, including the home team students and the soldiers facing off against them.

“Commander,” Shiran called out, facing the group standing a small distance away from the training.

“Hm? Shiran?”

The tall silver-haired woman turned toward us. This was the commander of the Alliance Knights I had met at yesterday’s party. Her sharp, blue eyes glanced my way for a moment but immediately turned back to Shiran as the two of them began a business-like exchange.

Mikihiko, who was also nearby, waved to me upon spotting us. He had apparently accompanied the commander here but wasn't participating in the training, just as he had said in the morning. I waved back and then looked to the center of the room. Ten weak boys, armed with wooden poles wrapped with cloth, worked one-on-one with the soldiers.

It made sense that not everyone was participating, but the majority of the students were here. Among them were the class peacemaker Sayoshi Taichi, the bullied kid Kudou Riku, and even the blond delinquent Sakagami Gouta. I assumed the latter wouldn't give a rat's ass about training and would abstain, so this was a little unexpected.

Upon closer inspection, Sakagami wasn't very enthusiastic. He looked a little dissatisfied. He kept stealing glances at Juumonji, who was standing there with his arms crossed, overseeing his training. It seemed he was only here because of the unwanted attention of the exploration team.

The only one from the exploration team who wasn't present was Iino Yuna. Just as she'd said this morning, she was making preparations to lead a group of imperial knights into the Depths to rescue any surviving students.

Judging from the way the students looked at the exploration team yesterday, with admiration and reverence, the only ones not participating were those unable to because of their health. It was good for them to be motivated. I even felt envious about it.

The exploration team was fully intent on living here as heroes, motivating the students who admired them to strive to be like them. Perhaps by looking at the brilliant and heroic futures that awaited them, they could forget reality, forget that they could never return to their own world. Or perhaps this was a result of the solidarity they had built which was characteristic of emergency situations. In any case, they were now walking the path to becoming the saviors of this world.

On the other hand, the locals naïvely believed we were going to fight by their side to protect humanity. With so many factors at play, it was natural for the students to choose to fight as saviors. Such adoration and expectation had a strong influence over the mind. One could even call it the work of mass psychology. If not for that, there should've been those who didn't like the idea

of fighting. Considering how Sakagami was participating despite being such a pain about it earlier, one couldn't make light of the influence of mass psychology.

In a situation where everyone was doing the same thing, actions that differed from the norm attracted a certain amount of attention. It invited suspicion and distrust. To someone who was hiding something, this would be fatal. Since I planned to get out of this fortress the moment I got a translation runestone, it was difficult for me to take action. That's why I envied their eagerness.

"Thank you for waiting," Shiran said as I watched the ongoing training. She had managed to get the approval she needed. "Well then, come this way please."

"Got it."

I gave Mikihiko a wave and left the training ground behind.



Shiran brought us to a staircase which led underground. After a brief exchange with the guard, we descended the stairs. A long and narrow corridor shrouded in darkness stretched out at the bottom. Shiran touched a lighting runestone at the entrance, filling the corridor with light.

"...This is the mausoleum for those lost in battle. Fort Tilia was constructed 250 years ago. Those who have died since then are all enshrined here together as martyrs alongside the great saviors."

I listened to Shiran's solemn voice as I gulped. The stone walls of the long corridor had tens of thousands of rings embedded in them. Blue gems faced outward on every single one. They were the same as the rings I handed over to Shiran, but there was one definitive difference. The color of the gems was different. All of the ones here were blue. The ones I handed to Shiran were yellow.

These rings were distributed to knights and soldiers alike as identification tags. The inlaid gem was a runestone. Upon confirming the owner's death, the ring was retrieved and enshrined in this mausoleum. As for the bodies, they were cremated and entombed in another part of the fortress. Depending on the

circumstances, the ashes could also be returned to the deceased's hometown along with their belongings.

The mausoleum also held swords, shields, armor, and other such articles that belonged to saviors of the past enshrined within. To the people of this world, being commemorated alongside the saviors was the greatest of honors. However, our business was elsewhere.

"Let's go."

Shiran guided us down a narrow path to the side. There were no rings embedded on the walls here. The ceiling was low. It felt claustrophobic. At the end of the path, we found ourselves in a small room with three-meter walls on every side. In the center was an altar made of blackened stone with several large plates on top of it. Mountains of rings were piled on the plates. The gems in these rings were the same color as those in the mausoleum.

"Then, let us begin."

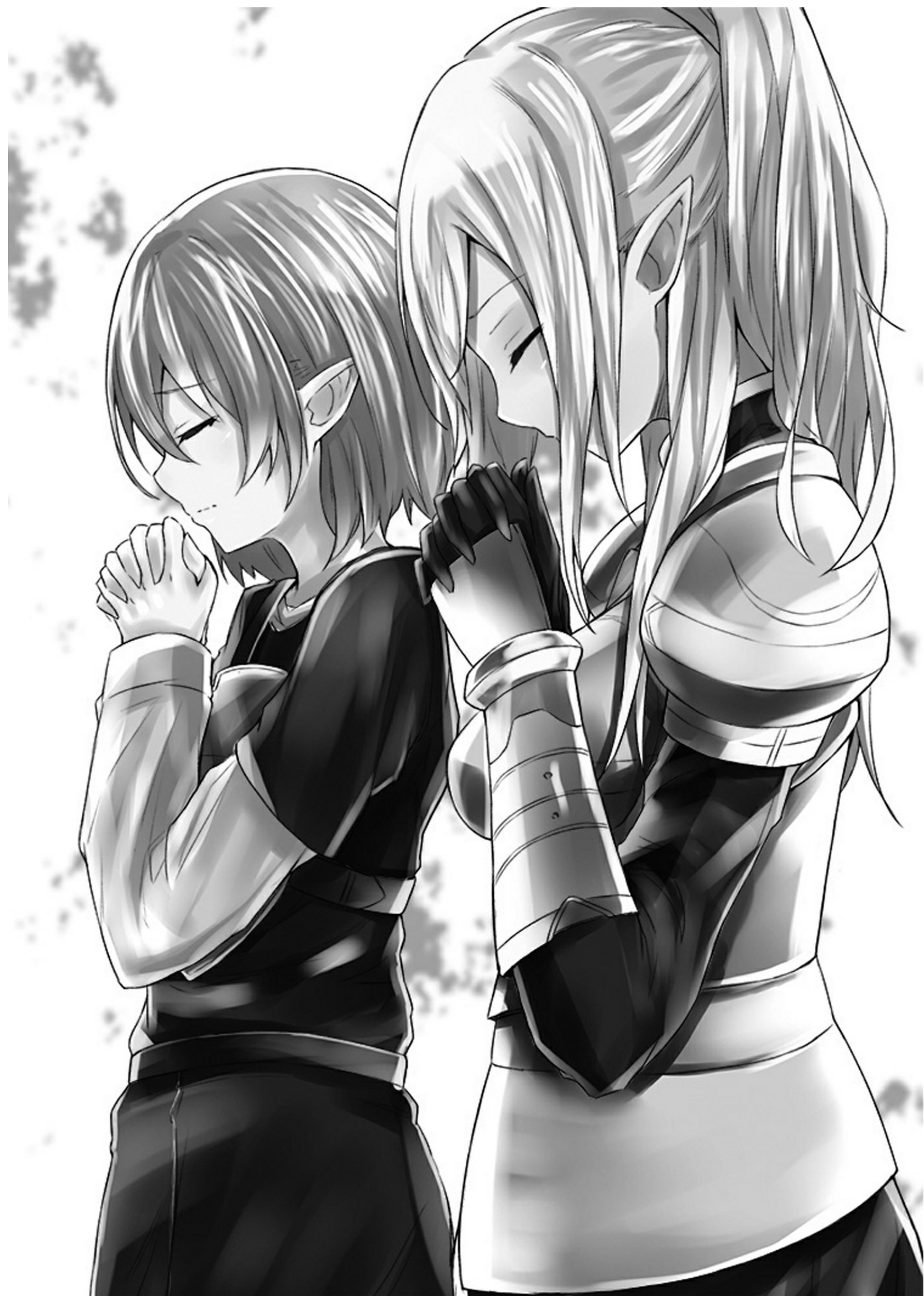
Shiran walked up to the altar and took out the rings I had given her, placing them atop the mountain of rings with blue gems.

"Bestow the flames of purification upon the pitiful deceased," she said in a solemn tone as she swiped her finger along the altar's edge.

The altar itself was some manner of magic tool. The top of it burst into a green flame. Engulfed by the fire, the yellow gems turned blue.

"..."

Shiran offered a silent prayer and Kei joined in behind her with closed eyes.



It was an austere ceremony, but the ritual itself was quite plain. It was rather lonely that there were only four participants including myself and Lily. Normally, a memorial service for the deceased would involve a few more formalities, but they weren't performed this time. That's because the owners of these rings had turned into ghouls.

"These rings were originally handed out to everyone who fights in the Woodlands as a means to identify those who turn into ghouls."

I watched Shiran's back as I recalled what she told me. With stifled emotions, she explained why she had asked me to participate in this memorial service.

"It's known that the mana flowing within monsters is characteristic for every type of monster. Humans who turn into ghouls are no exception to that. The runestone in the ring is etched to show its effect when it detects the mana characteristic of a ghoul."

In this world, death wasn't always the end. It was rare, but people did turn into ghouls. In the Woodlands, however, the outbreak of ghouls was abnormally high because of the density of mana in these lands. Battle led to an even greater outbreak of ghouls. When many corpses fell in one place, that density would temporarily increase.

Just as we'd found out in the Colony, mana was contained within the soul. When one defeated a monster, they could secure some of their mana. That was why the exploration team over-hunted the monsters in the area. It was also one of the reasons I had proactively looked to encounter more monsters.

However, the mana gained in defeat was just a small portion of the monster's mana. The large majority of it dispersed into the area. That was why corpses temporarily increased the density of mana within a region. This caused many ghouls to rise on battlefields, which was why the knights were equipped with a means of identifying them as such.

"Those whose rings turn from blue to yellow have changed from human to monster. They are no longer treated as warriors. In the old days, they were not even given a memorial service."

Even if they were once humans, ghouls were still monsters. And monsters

were the archenemies of humanity. As such, becoming a ghoul in death was the greatest of dishonors. They couldn't be enshrined alongside the great saviors within the mausoleum. The meaning behind this ritual leaned far more toward purification than comfort or repose for the souls of the dead.

The yellow runestone placed upon the altar returned to blue. By doing so, the deceased returned to being humans. Having said that, it just took a negative and zeroed it out. It didn't restore the honor of the dead. Nobody bothered to participate in a memorial service for those who had turned into ghouls. On the contrary, it was an unspoken agreement that all refrain from attending while the dead were quietly interred. But that didn't mean those who personally knew the deceased felt no pain from their deaths.

"Uhh... Hic..."

Quiet sobbing resounded through the room. Kei was in tatters. Shiran turned around and hugged her. She was acting resolute, but her eyes were also red.

"Geez. Look at you. Your face is a mess. That's enough, go wash your face," Shiran told the sobbing girl.

"Sh-Shorry..."

Shiran's normally strict voice was gentle now. She wasn't acting as a knight here. She was acting as an older sister for this little girl. Kei kept her face hidden as she turned back toward the path and left.

"I must thank you for participating in the memorial service for my subordinates, Takahiro, Miho."

Shiran bowed deeply to us. She grieved over the dead, much like Kei. The reason she had asked us to participate in this memorial service was because there was significance in having saviors in attendance. It was the smallest of parting gifts she could offer to these knights who had lost their honor. I understood this, which was why I decided to participate in the ritual. I believed this to be my responsibility as the one who brought their rings here.

"...Were you close to them?" Lily asked.

"Yes," Shiran replied with a nod. "They treated Kei particularly well. Please forgive her for showing such unsightly behavior."

“It’s nothing you need to apologize for,” Lily responded with a shake of her head. “She’s a good girl. Besides, it looks like she adores you quite dearly. Is she your little sister?”

“No. She is my niece. She is the orphan left behind by my deceased brother.”

“Oh, I see. She looks so much like you I thought she was your sister.”

“We were raised just like sisters. She lost her mother at a young age, and my brother spent much of his time away from the village working as a knight. Her grandmother—my mother—took care of her and raised her together with me.”

“What kind of place is your village?” I asked.

Shiran narrowed her eyes nostalgically. I had yet to meet any of the people of this world beyond this fortress. I was quite interested in how humanity lived here.

“It’s a small village near the Fringes. It’s one of the reclamation villages we elves inhabit. Even though the people are poor, we live together in solidarity.”

“Reclamation village...?”

“They’re villages that exist to clear the Woodlands which gradually spread if left unchecked. Even today, there are countless reclamation villages bordering the Woodlands. Of course, many such villages suffer devastating attacks from monsters coming out of the forest. As such, our village is always on guard against such attacks.”

The phrase “drawing the short straw” came to mind. However, such a thing was a necessity in this harsh world. If they didn’t live near the forest and cut down the trees, the Woodlands would engulf the entire world. Even if the saviors could defeat monsters and thin their numbers, they couldn’t cultivate new lands across this enormous world all on their own.

A portion of those fulfilling such a role included the elves, which was likely a reflection of the circumstances their race was burdened with. Even on our way to the mausoleum, the gazes pointed at Shiran and Kei weren’t all favorable. Disdain. Scorn. Jeering. Thinking back on it now, those gazes might’ve been what Kei was concerned about on our way here. Judging from the way they grieved for the dead, there were those in their country who looked upon them

favorably. But those who didn't were in the majority.

"You can't call it a good location by any standards. Nevertheless, that village is my hometown. Looking back now, I miss it. It's already been five years since I left," Shiran muttered in a heartrending voice.

Images of her hometown were surely flashing across her mind. I shook my head ever so slightly as images of a world I could never return to, one that I tried not to think about as much as I could, came to mine.

"Five years, huh? That's quite the long time. Do you ever think of going back?" I asked.

"I couldn't possibly think otherwise. I cannot return, however. This is also for the village's sake," Shiran replied with a bittersweet smile. "The knights stationed at the fortresses, including Fort Tilia, suppress the monsters in the Fringes. This reduces the number of monsters that come out of the Woodlands, which indirectly helps the defenses of the nearby reclamation villages. Regardless, monsters still trample several villages into oblivion every year. Even the wreckage gets swallowed by the forest."

She then opened her hand and looked down at her palm.

"My brother fought from this fortress and died without ever returning to the village. I will likely never return to my village alive either."

Her gaze was strong. Her voice told me of her conviction. She clenched her fist tightly.

"However, even if I am never to see it with my own eyes again, I want to protect my hometown. I want to protect the villages that share their circumstances. I want to protect the comrades who fight by my side. That's why I trained this body and honed my skills."

Her words were filled with passion. I involuntarily held my breath at the weight of her resolve.

"...Ah." Seeing my reaction, Shiran unclenched her fist. She smiled awkwardly and fiddled with the tip of her pointy ear as if trying to gloss things over. "My apologies. I didn't mean to bore you with such matters."

I shook my head. “It wasn’t boring. I can...kind of understand that sort of thing.”

She pushed herself to get stronger for the sake of those she wanted to protect. I could strongly sympathize with these feelings; after all, I trained with Gerbera every day until I was in tatters. In my case, I didn’t want to hold back the others while they protected me. That outweighed my desire to protect them, but my feelings of wanting to push myself for their sake was the same. Even if I was knocked senseless, vomiting up everything I had in my stomach, it was nothing compared to the pain of being unable to do a single thing.

I unconsciously took hold of Lily’s hand as she stood next to me.

“I believe those feelings of yours are more important than anything else,” I told Shiran.

“...Thank you very much.”

Shiran looked at our clasped hands as her lips broke into a small smile.

Chapter 7: As a Servant, As a Master

After the memorial service for the casualties in the Woodlands ended, we returned to the surface. I felt a sense of liberation by doing so, not only because of the claustrophobic feeling down there. The atmosphere of the underground mausoleum had a peculiar weight to it.

“About your plans after this, Takahiro, Miho, did you intend on joining the others for training?” Shiran asked as we came out of the staircase. “I heard from the commander that the other saviors should be finishing their training about now. As such, um... Seeing that you missed your opportunity to participate because you accompanied me for the memorial service of my comrades, though it may be presumptuous of me, I can teach you two regarding swordsmanship and spearmanship. How about it?”

It honestly wasn’t a bad offer. My training with Gerbera up until now had been extremely useful in getting my body accustomed to battle. However, it did have one major flaw. Gerbera excelled in battle, but she prided herself in overwhelming strength. She didn’t rely on any tricks, so she had no knowledge whatsoever of martial arts. Obviously, she couldn’t teach something she knew nothing about.

On the other hand, for a weak human like me, the craftiness of martial arts was an absolute necessity for me to avoid being a hindrance to my companions in battle. In that sense, Shiran’s proposal wasn’t bad at all. She had already perceived I could use mana, anyway. I didn’t have to worry about exposing myself by training with her. There weren’t any other students around either, so I could be more at ease. Furthermore, no matter what shape it took, participating in some manner of training at least once could serve as an excuse to abstain from any further sessions.

I exchanged glances with Lily, and after she nodded back to me, I accepted Shiran’s offer.



After that, we waited for Kei to wash her tear-streaked face before heading over to a training ground. There was a slight miscalculation on my part here. With the students gone, soldiers were now using the space for their regular training. They would surely make room for us if I caused a scene, but I didn't like flaunting the authority of even a perverse savior like that. It was just myself and Lily training, so we didn't need a very big space anyway. So, we asked Shiran to guide us over to a smaller room where we began learning the basics of martial arts.

There was a limit to what could be done in half a day. All Shiran taught me was how to swing a sword, but there were many things to learn, such as how to move my weight when stepping in and how to hold up the edge of the blade. Shiran was a good teacher. It would still take some time to be able to put any of this into practice, though.

Lily finished her training quickly and switched to spectating. She wasn't really slacking off or anything. She was just making sure she didn't draw undue suspicion because of her abnormal stamina as a monster. We had managed to get this far without anyone learning her identity, but there was no such thing as being too careful. I had in fact ended up in one sweat-inducing incident already.

"The way you use mana is rather peculiar, isn't it, Takahiro?"

When Shiran had said that, it felt like all the blood drained from my face at once, despite being flushed from the physical exertion. I had learned how to use mana from Gerbera...from a high monster. Moreover, the large majority of the mana flowing within me came from her and my other servants. Maybe the very nature of my mana was different from normal humans. Shiran had sensed something about that.

"You can tell that kind of thing?"

"I am a spiritualist, after all. It's impossible to sympathize with spirits if you do not excel in the use of mana."

In general, it sounded like elves were similar to cheaters. Perhaps that was why they ended up being discriminated against.

"I guess it's because I taught myself. The way I use mana might be different from the typical person."

“No. Even when self-taught, mana does not normally flow in that manner.”

“I-Is that so? Then... Right. Isn't it because I'm from another world?”

“I see. That may certainly be the case. Anything could happen with the saviors.”

Other than that one hiccup, the time passed without any particular problems. I ended up continuing my training until evening. The room didn't have windows, so nighttime came by before I even knew it.

We ended up missing dinner, so Shiran arranged for meals to be carried to our room. After my training was done, Kei prepared some drinking water and a damp cloth. Lily happily took care of me by wiping off my sweat with the cloth. As my guard, she couldn't leave my side, so she watched my training the entire time. I thought it would be boring for her, but she was all smiles.

“Hm?”

“...It's nothing.”

Lily turned to me after realizing I was staring at her. I shook my head. Watching her enjoy herself so much made me very happy. I decided to let her do as she pleased as she practically hummed while looking after me.



After thanking Shiran for arranging dinner for us, Lily and I returned to our room. I washed myself off with the hot water Kei brought us and changed into my jersey. I had my dinner and then lay down in bed.

“Are you tired, Master?” Lily asked as she sat down next to me.

“Yeah, a little.”

My fatigue melted away and turned into drowsiness. The exhaustion remaining in my arms and joints was a result of the training I did with Shiran. It was nothing major. If pushed to say it, my mental fatigue was far more substantial.

Ever since coming to this fortress, I had been on edge at all times other than when I was in this room. I thought it was the same feeling as being constantly vigilant of monster attacks while living in the Woodlands, but the sensation felt

heavier here in the fortress.

Monsters aside from my servants would attack me on sight. The distinction between friend and foe was black and white. Because I could tell in an instant how to deal with someone, life in the Woodlands was easier.

Things were different here, however. Everything around me was a shade of gray. I had to keep on guard against every human I passed by. But I couldn't just attack them and remove any obstacles.

Fortunately, my time wasn't wasted by being here. I'd learned a lot by coming here. On the other hand, there were still no signs I was going to be able to resolve my problems. The more I knew, the clearer my difficult situation became.

"You know what, Master...? Master? Did you fall asleep?"

I had spent the entire day in the fortress, so my fatigue was rather considerable. Just as I was about to tell her I was still awake, my consciousness sank away into the darkness.



The third day of our stay at Fort Tilia...

"Tired..."

"You're as bad with mornings as ever, Master."

I listened to Lily's exasperated, yet somehow charming, voice as I stifled a yawn. It was still early in the morning, a gloomy sky visible outside the window. We waited for Shiran to come to our room. We had agreed to continue learning martial arts from her. Shiran was often active early in the morning, so she had invited us to join her.

She was a good teacher. I had been swinging around my sword in a self-taught manner before this, so I managed to learn far more from yesterday's training than I expected. And now I had the opportunity to learn even more from her. I couldn't complain just because it was early in the morning.

I stifled another yawn when a knock came on our door. Lily went to get it. I thought Shiran had arrived, but it was actually my shaggy-haired friend.

“Yo. Morning, Takahiro, Mizushima.”

“Huh? What brings you here, Kaneki?” Lily asked.

“I heard Lieutenant Shiran is teaching Takahiro how to use a sword, so I thought I’d join in,” he answered as he gave me a wave.

“You?” I asked with a cocked head. “What brought on this turn of events?”

“Uhh, how do I put it?” Mikihiko smiled in embarrassment. “I’ve also been training with Lieutenant Shiran every now and then. So, well, that’s how it is.”

“Is that so?”

I was assaulted by a small fit of laughter. He was embarrassed to be seen putting in some effort. I knew about this part of his personality very well already.

“Besides, it’ll be more fun to get some exercise with you rather than those hero wannabes and the guys trying to wake up to their cheats. The commander also has a lot of trust in the lieutenant. I’ve learned how to strengthen my body and use simple magic, somewhat.”

“I see. That’s pretty much the same as me. It’ll be convenient for Shiran to teach us together, then. Well, I can’t use magic, though.”

“That’s fine. All I can really use is the grade 1 water magic I learned back in the Colony. I mean, I would’ve died in the Woodlands without it. It’s been more than useful already. But I don’t really have much talent for magic. I learned body strengthening after getting here and have been working on it pretty much exclusively.” Mikihiko flicked the hilt of a shortsword at his waist. “Seems I’ve got more potential with this than magic, anyway.”

“Oh yeah, you’re using a shortsword?”

“Damn straight.”

Mikihiko had four sturdy-looking shortswords with thirty-centimeter-long blades hanging from his waist. He drew two of them out of their sheaths backhanded and a metallic ringing resounded through the room. His smooth movements demonstrated his familiarity with them. It showed how serious Mikihiko was about his training.

“Two at once?”

“Yup. Ain’t it cool?”

This part was just like him. Although, the fact that he had spares at the ready indicated he wasn’t just playing around. He properly took actual combat situations into consideration.

Mikihiko returned his swords to their sheaths and puffed out his chest. “My goal is to be a master of everything! I’m aiming to be the commander’s knight. I figured I’d start with getting familiar with an accessible weapon and have been studying under Lieutenant Shiran.”

He then took a look around the room. “So, where is she?”

“We were just waiting for her. She should be here soon...”

We heard a knock just as I was in the middle of talking.

Speak of the devil, I guess.

This time it was Shiran.

“Good morning, Takahiro, Miho. I see Mikihiko is with you as well.”

“Yeah. Morning, Shiran... Is something wrong?”

I knit my brows. There was a shadow hanging over Shiran’s humble expression.

“My apologies, Takahiro,” Shiran said as she lowered her head with a sorrowful look. “Regarding this morning’s training... Would you mind waiting for a short while before we begin?”

“I don’t really mind. Did something happen?”

“Yes. After telling Kei to prepare for this morning’s training, I haven’t been able to find her.”

“...What?” I narrowed my eyes.

“This has never happened before, so I’m worried about her.”

Shiran looked distraught. I learned how dearly she thought of her niece Kei after seeing them in the mausoleum yesterday. Of course this would shake her.

“Excuse me, but I would like to go search for her. This means breaking my promise with you, so I wanted to inform you of such first...”

“I understand. It’s really no problem. Please prioritize your search for Kei. Actually, we’ll help too.”

“Huh? No, that’s...”

Just as Shiran was about to refuse my proposal, Mikihiko cut in with a flippant smile. “It’s fine, it’s fine. We’ve got nothing to do anyway,” he said as he pushed Shiran into the hallway. “Get going already, Lieutenant. We’ll start searching right away too.”

“V-Very well. Then, though it pains me, please lend me your assistance.” Shiran hesitantly bowed and took her leave.

After seeing her off, Mikihiko turned back toward me. “That work for you, Takahiro?”

He’d apparently jumped in because he’d seen I was struggling to respond. I was grateful for his somewhat pushy side at times like these.

“Sorry about that. That really helped us out.”

“It’s fine. So, what’s going on? You’re gonna explain things, right?” Mikihiko asked with a curious gaze.

“Yeah. I only have a baseless suspicion of what happened, but Kei may have disappeared as a result of being near us.”

All composure vanished from Mikihiko’s expression. “Aren’t you overthinking things a little?”

“Maybe, but maybe not.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Judging from our conversations yesterday, Kei is a very serious girl. I don’t think she would slack off to play around somewhere. It’s more natural to assume something happened. What’s more, Shiran said this has never happened before. Even her close relative can’t remember a similar incident. It’s highly probable, then, that ‘something’ that hadn’t been there before caused this, like the people who recently showed up at this fortress.”

“Can’t count it out completely, huh? I see. You’ve got a point. They’ve been here three days now. It’s about the right time for the excited dumbasses to start acting like idiots.”

Unlike Shiran, both Mikihiko and I knew their visitors from our world weren’t anything like heroes. It wouldn’t be strange for some of them to act however they pleased after being pampered like this.

“Tch. I should’ve kept an eye on those bastards!” Mikihiko groaned as he kicked the floor in frustration.

I rebuked Mikihiko. “Calm down. We don’t know if it’s actually the case yet.”

It was in fact uncertain whether it was one of our peers or not. However, if it was... My mind recalled the image of the miserable end Mizushima Miho had faced, as well as the image of Katou when I first saw her in that hut.

“Anyway, let’s get to it quickly,” I said with a shake of my head.

Mikihiko nodded, his expression stern. “Right. Even if someone saw what happened, they might hold their tongue if Lieutenant Shiran asks ’cause of their special privileges as saviors. On that point, we’re equals. We can probably get it out of them.”

“Let’s split up. I’ll search with Mizushima.”

“Mm. Good idea. It’ll be dangerous for Mizushima to be on her own if we’re up against some idiot. Okay. See you later.”

Mikihiko rushed off, and Lily and I started our search for Kei. We walked down the corridor with quick steps. We didn’t pay any attention to the soldiers who courteously bowed to us. We had no intentions of asking around for information like Mikihiko suggested. Having said that, we weren’t just blindly running around either.

“Lily.”

“I know. You need my nose, right?”

Lily gave me a reliable nod as we came to a mutual understanding. We headed to the room where we trained with Shiran yesterday. The plan was to come here for some exercise this morning. Shiran had told Kei to prepare for

that, so it was highly likely she came here or somewhere nearby. Lily could chase Kei's scent from here by mimicking the firefang's sense of smell.

Lily took the lead as we rapidly moved through the fortress, encountering fewer people the farther we progressed.

"It smells like rusty iron," she said as she sniffed the air. "It's probably the smell of armor."

"This area must be used for storage or something, then."

That was why there was nobody around. What would Kei be doing here...? What could be done to her here? My bad premonition started to feel like it had a sense of reality to it. I quickened my footsteps.

"Found you."

Before long, we found a blond boy and a blonde girl in an unpopulated corridor. The girl's hair was naturally blonde and was practically transparent. The boy dragging her by the wrist had dyed blond hair which showed black roots, meaning he was one of the students who came from my world.

This boy, treated like a great hero here in this fortress, was doing something absolutely unheroic. He was in the middle of dragging a girl still in her tender years into a room. Her childish face was stiff with fear, yet she was unable to resist, seeing who he was.

"..."

This was the worst-case scenario I'd hypothesized. However, it had yet to reach a full disaster. It seemed we managed to make it here in time. Having said that, I didn't feel relief. My heart was already filled with an entirely different emotion.

The boy noticed me as I drew closer with quick steps.

His expression twisted with displeasure into a grimace. He began clamoring about something or other.

His attitude was quite different compared to when I was faced with him yesterday morning. I wondered why that was. Then I realized it was because the situation here was a little different.

There was no exploration team here.

It was so easy to understand that it was disgusting.

I kept up my pace as I drew closer, and upon reaching him, I grasped the boy's head in my palm as he cursed, bitched, and moaned at me.

There was no use arguing. Before he could even react, I slammed his face into the door of the room he was trying to drag the girl into. Blood spurted from his nose and he lost consciousness without letting out so much as a scream. I let go and his body collapsed to the floor. It was all too quick.

He was full of openings. Even someone like me could easily overpower him. He undoubtedly believed he could hurt others by doing whatever the hell he wanted without ever being attacked himself. There was no need to bother Lily with this.

But maybe this was pretty much to be expected. This guy hadn't gone through unrelenting combat training. He hadn't experienced being on the precipice of life and death. He had no resolve. He simply wielded the privilege of being a savior as his shield to do whatever he wanted. He only stood on the side of brandishing violence, not receiving it. That was the kind of human he was.

I looked away from the boy and turned around. "Are you okay?"

Kei had fallen to her butt and was looking up at me with wide eyes and a gobsmacked expression.

"...Oh, right. You can't understand me now, huh?"

I came from another world, whereas Kei was local to this one. With no translation runestone nearby, we couldn't understand each other. I scratched my head wondering what to do when Kei rose to her feet and started yelling.

"—, —! —!"

"Whoa there."

I was surprised by the sudden movement, but she was just clinging to me. My name was somewhere in the middle of the words she was yelling.

"—, —..."

Kei burst into tears. It was surely a frightening experience for her. Even if it was only an attempted crime, it didn't mean her heart was left unscarred. I brushed her head as gently as possible as I turned to look over my shoulder.



“...”

I looked down at the fallen blond boy, blood splattering out of his nose—

“You can’t kill him,” Lily said as she suddenly grasped my shoulder.

That brought me back to my senses. I awkwardly scratched my head. I wasn’t displaying a clear intent to kill him, but if she hadn’t restrained me, I don’t know what I would’ve done myself.

“...Sorry.”

“Don’t be, Mas—Majima. I know full well that you hate people like this, and the reason you do.”

“...”

We’d planned from the very beginning that while Lily was pretending to be Mizushima Miho, unless something extreme called for it, I would handle anything that came up here. However, I wasn’t planning to finish him off. I didn’t have any hesitance to dirty my hands in blood after all this time, but this wasn’t the place for it.

It was different from the three boys I had found in that hut. It was different from Kaga. This wasn’t the lawless forest. I couldn’t forget that this was human territory. Even if I knew I could probably escape punishment using the special consideration they gave their saviors, and the fact that he was scum trying to assault a little girl, I couldn’t afford to finish him off here.

I don’t even get what’s right or wrong anymore... But even as I felt at a complete loss over this, I continued to gently brush Kei’s head as she cried in my chest.

“...?”

Just then, I noticed someone watching us. I overlooked it until now because of my tunnel vision, but there was another boy in the corridor, sitting on the floor against the wall.

“...Kudou?”

It was the bullied kid I had exchanged one or two words with yesterday. For

some reason, one of his cheeks was swollen. Lily noticed him a little earlier than me and walked up toward him.

“Are you alright? Umm...”

Just then, she turned back around. She immediately came back and clung to my body. The reason for this was to fulfill her role as my guard.

“Y-You fucker! The hell...do you think you’re doing...?!”

The blond boy, Sakagami Gouta, regained consciousness and rose to his feet with wobbly steps.

“Y-You’ll...regret this!”

Sakagami glared at me with bloodshot eyes as blood dripped from his nose.

“You’ll definitely regret this!”

His resentment was completely unjustified. His insanity-fueled anger was endlessly shallow. But there was an instability to this which was characteristic of such shallow humans. A sense of danger ran down my spine, one which differed in nature entirely from when I was faced with monsters. Humans like this would do anything. I had a premonition. This guy would never let go of his misdirected resentment.

It was possible a horrible tragedy would come of this. He didn’t need a lofty reason like losing something important to him. On the contrary, such trivial matters often gave birth to troublesome situations. I’d learned this from my experience when the Colony was destroyed.

Kei was a good girl. Shiran always faced others with sincerity. Mizushima Miho and Katou also didn’t deserve what happened to them. So, why did those girls have to be hurt by these bastards? Was it really all right for me to let this guy go free? Wouldn’t it be better to quietly eliminate him now? My hand unconsciously reached for the wooden sword at my waist, but just before anything could happen...

“What’s going on?!”

A man’s voice cut in between us as we glared each other down. I kept a careful eye on Sakagami and shifted my focus toward the voice, where Juumonji

was standing. He walked up to us with an angry expression. I wasn't sure whether his timing was good or bad. With this development, I had no choice but to stop my hand.

“Another fight? What is it this time...?”

“Tch... It's nothing.” Sakagami's attitude changed in an instant. He threw me a hateful look and then walked past Juumonji with quick strides.

“Ugh, stop! Sakagami!”

Juumonji hesitated for a bit, but after shooting us a look, he decided to chase after Sakagami.

“Majima, Mizushima, and...Kudou, was it? I'll be taking care of this. Don't do anything unnecessary, got it?!”

His voice was filled with inconcealable irritation. It turned out acting like a leader was rather troublesome. It seemed Juumonji had accumulated quite a lot of stress over these three days. It was understandable. Other than being a cheater, Juumonji was nothing more than a student. A troublemaker like Sakagami was an endless source of headaches.

With that, Juumonji ran off without waiting for a reply as he grumbled in frustration. “Seriously. How long does he plan on acting like he's still in that world? Why do I have to be cursed with a guy who doesn't understand that everything is different here...?!”

This is another world. Everything is different from where we came from. Juumonji had said something similar yesterday. He certainly had a point. He was also right about Sakagami acting like he didn't understand any of this. On the other hand, I honestly doubted whether Juumonji, who easily broke through any obstacles up until now thanks to his cheats, understood the difference himself.

If he truly understood the difference between worlds, why would he try to act like he was some kind of hero...? My thoughts were pretty much just the mundane envy of the unlucky toward the lucky, however...

“What are you even saying? Nothing has changed at all...” Kudou mumbled.

And as I pondered over such things, those words left a strangely strong impression on me.

The bullied kid, Kudou Riku, had risen to his feet while my attention was distracted by Juumonji's arrival.

"Are you okay? Did you hit your head?" Lily asked him with a worried look.

"I'm okay," he replied with a slight smile on his thin face. "Umm, I'm used to this."

He looked fully aware of his surroundings and his footsteps were steady. There was no need to worry about any major injuries.

"Hm? What's up?"

Kei, who was still clinging to my chest, began to stir.

"—, —."

She let go of me with a sniffle and said something in a language we couldn't understand. Then she bowed her head to Kudou. I shifted my gaze from Kei over to the boy with a swollen cheek.

"...Did you maybe get punched for sticking up for this girl?"

"Ahaha... Not that I managed to accomplish anything, as embarrassing as it is..."

Kudou forced a smile and scratched his swollen cheek. Touching it must have hurt because the edge of his lips spasmed briefly. He drew back his smile then gave us a light bow.

"I'm glad you came, Senpai. Please take care of her."

"Sure thing."

Kudou left, his steps a little unstable. There was now only Lily, Kei, and myself left in the empty corridor.

"What's wrong?" Lily asked as she cocked her head and looked at me from the side.

"...Nothing."

I shook my head. The meaning behind Kudou's words was still on my mind, just a little. Nothing had changed. That was what he said. I found it strange he could claim that after coming to this world. In any case, there was something to do before that.

“—, —!”

I lowered my gaze as something tugged on the front of my clothes. Kei was looking up at me with reddened eyes.

“Let's head back for now. Shiran is worried.”

I plopped my hand on top of Kei's head. Her humble and attractive features resembled Shiran's as she gave me a gentle smile. I decided that, for now, it was at least a good thing I had managed to protect this smile.



After contacting Shiran and Mikihiko, it was decided that Kei would take shelter in our room. We borrowed a new translation runestone and Kei spent the whole day there. We still had a lot to learn about this world, and Kei was also quite interested in mine, so our conversations were fixed on these two points.

While we were at it, I managed to ask about acquiring runestones. Most runestones were apparently rather expensive. Translation runestones in particular were only used for conversing with visitors from other worlds, so with no demand, they very rarely showed up on the marketplace. It was very difficult to acquire one without going through the army or the knights. This was a bit of a problem, and it apparently showed on my face. I had no choice but to deceive Kei when she looked at me curiously.

“Thank you very much for taking care of Kei.”

When night came, Shiran finished her work with the knights and came to pick Kei up.

“I'm sorry to have taken your time,” Kei told us apologetically.

“It's fine. I'm grateful we could hear so many interesting things from you.”

Kei blushed and bashfully hung her head. “Oh, it's nothing. I also had a lot of

fun hearing the stories you two had to tell.”

After giving her an affectionate look, Shiran walked up closer to me.

“About the matter you proposed, Takahiro...”

“...How’d it go?”

We talked with hushed voices. Lily was keeping Kei’s attention.

“It has been approved for Kei to take care of both you and Miho.”

“I see. That’s good.”

I let out a sigh of relief. We had asked the knights if Kei could serve as our personal attendant through Shiran. And as expected, with our positions as saviors, they allowed us this level of autonomy. Kei was nothing more than Shiran’s attendant to begin with, so she didn’t do any work directly for the knights.

The reason we were doing this was of course to use my status to shelter Kei, using her being our attendant as a pretext. On top of Juumonji warning us to keep quiet about what happened, we didn’t know how those in the fortress would treat the elf Kei if she tried to claim one of the saviors had been about to assault her. We couldn’t turn this morning’s incident into a serious matter. However, nobody could complain if she served us as an attendant like this.

Sakagami had backed down because of Juumonji, but he was bound to shift the blame and do something out of unjustified resentment. It was best to keep Kei within eyesight as much as we could for her own protection, especially against scum like Sakagami.

“But I still cannot believe it,” Shiran said with a heavy sigh. “That an esteemed savior would do such a thing...”

“I understand how you feel, but it’s true. There’s no way you think Kei is lying about it, right?”

“Not at all, naturally. But still...”

“We also saw it with our own eyes. It turned into a scuffle too, but without much result.”

From Shiran's perspective, saviors were living legends, the subjects of her faith. She couldn't even imagine one looking at such a young girl with wicked thoughts. There was a hint of exhaustion in the depressed expression on her face. Having said that, she was properly facing the reality before her and knew she had to keep on guard to protect her family.

"I told Kei this already, but if anything happens, please find us immediately. We're also saviors here. We can cover for you."

"Thank you very much. I seem to have caused you much trouble with this... I really don't know what to even say to you, Takahiro."

"Don't worry about it. Sakagami's in the wrong here. You're not causing me any trouble at all," I said with a shake of my head. "Besides, there's no way I can ignore a dirtbag like Sakagami hurting such a nice girl."

Kei noticed me looking her way. A smile took shape on her childish yet well-featured face, much like a blooming flower.

"Takahiro! Now that my sister is here, shall we get going?"

Kei ran over and pulled on my hand. She was frozen stiff from tension yesterday, but perhaps because of this morning's incident, or because we had spent the entire day together, she had gotten quite attached to me.

"Yeah, sure thing."

With Kei here, we brought our secret talks to an end.

"Are you okay with that too, Shiran?"

"Yes, I don't mind."

Because we'd ended up missing our early morning training, we asked Shiran to teach us for the rest of the day instead.

"Though it pains me, this is the only thing I can repay you with."

"Don't be that way. Your guidance has really been helpful. Thank you for sparing the time for us."

The progress we made since coming to this fortress, including information on translation runestones, was honestly a great harvest to me. I wasn't

exaggerating in the least when I thanked her.

“Th-That’s not... I-I am but an inexperienced knight, but I’m happy to be of use.”

Shiran averted her gaze and fiddled with the tip of her pointy ear. This was apparently a nervous tic of hers when she was embarrassed. I felt a smile coming on as I got things moving along.

“Okay then. We’ll be in your care again.”

“Very well.”

Shiran smiled happily and nodded. Her usual solemn atmosphere faded and a cheerfulness suitable for a girl her age came to the fore. It seemed Shiran was also opening her heart to us.

“Hm?”

I noticed a gaze fixated on us.

“What’s wrong?” I asked Lily, who looked strangely happy as she watched me talk to Shiran.

Lily suddenly cast her gaze to the floor. “No, it’s nothing.” She then shook her head and turned a smile to Kei. “Come on, if we don’t hurry up, it’ll end up getting late like yesterday. Shall we?”

“Yes. Let’s go!”

Lily took Kei’s hand and began walking. Shiran followed behind them. Something was still kind of bothering me, but I couldn’t do anything about it if I didn’t keep up. Thus, I started walking and followed the girls out.



After our training, Lily and I returned to our room to wipe down before going out once more. We went to a large room where the other students were also gathering to have dinner. We chatted with Mikihiko and Kei and then returned right back to our room. We didn’t really have any reason to rush, but the fatigue from the day caught up to us.

I lay down in bed and looked up at the ceiling. We didn’t really train all that

long today, so I still had stamina to spare. However, the mental fatigue was no different from yesterday. Having to continuously steel myself whenever I was outside this room for two whole days just piled up my weariness.

As I rolled over, the two kids, Ayame and Asarina, started playing with each other. I'd ended up having to keep them restrained quite a lot these past two days. So, I got myself up and kept them company. The sweet and straightforward Ayame and the strange-looking Asarina were also cute companions of mine. Just playing with them healed my heart. After some play-biting, snout pressing, and twining around, it felt like they were the ones keeping me company instead of the other way around. That was just how much spending time like this relaxed my mind. It was also an indication of how exhausted I was.

I played around with Ayame and Asarina for a while before laying back down in bed. I spontaneously let out a heavy sigh. We had heard a lot from Kei, so now I had to discuss today's events together with Lily. I knew that, but as I looked up at the ceiling, my consciousness gradually grew farther and farther away...

"...Oh, Master, are you awake?"

I had ended up falling asleep without knowing it. I put my hand to my brow and let out a small groan.

"...How long have I been out?"

"Not all that long. It's just about past midnight or so."

Lily's face was right in front of my eyes, looking down at me from the side. She was sitting on the bed with my head resting on her thighs. She was close. Her sweet scent overpowered my senses.

Ayame was rolled up in a ball and sleeping on the other bed. Asarina figured we were going to start talking and was just swaying her head around lazily. As for Lily, she was looking down at me with an earnest gaze.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

Lily quietly shook her head. "Nope."

The sound of Ayame cutely snoring away was the very definition of tranquility, meaning nothing had happened while I was asleep. Today's events promptly went through my mind. However, I had no idea what could've happened to make Lily look like this.

On the contrary, Lily had been in a great mood all this time. When I chatted with Mikihiko, when I trained under Shiran, she was always watching me with a happy gaze. Thinking back on it now, she was in such a good mood it was almost strange.

"Master," Lily called me with a smile on her pretty face.

Her smile was as sweet as candy. But for some reason, it felt like she was smiling to hide something she was burdening herself with.

"Hey, Master? About what we plan to do from here on, I have a suggestion," Lily said before I could ask her about it.

"Did you come up with something?" I asked, slightly bewildered by the sudden change in topic.

The last time we talked about this, we managed to sort out all the things we needed to do here. The plan was to hide my ability, obtain a translation runestone, learn how to use it, and leave the fortress. Then we were going to find a settlement somewhere, secure a route for provisions, and find a place safe for Katou. No matter how I looked at it, these were all difficult to accomplish. I didn't have much confidence as things were now. Lily apparently had an idea of her own, however.

"Mm. I thought up two plans."

"Two?" I asked with a surprised look.

Lily nodded back to me with a smile and stretched her hand out to my cheek. I could feel her emotions passing through our mental path by means of her palm. She was determined. Beneath her gentle smile, Lily was resolving herself for something. Her will was strong, firm, and unyielding. It was like a quiet lake without a single ripple across its surface. I could feel her determination in her tone as she spoke of what she had been hiding in her heart.

"The first...is to say farewell to us."

“...”

“Make it so you never had the power to grant monsters hearts and tame them in doing so. Then there won’t be a single problem for you. You could quietly live in this world with the other students.”

Lily’s gaze was calm. “The other students are going to try and live on as saviors, but I’m sure some will choose to live differently. Not everyone will wake up to their powers, and even if they do, they won’t necessarily be able to keep pace with each other. You can just go along with the people who choose that path.”

Currently, the three exploration team members at Fort Tilia, Juumonji, Watanabe, and Iino, had the group of students under control. However, just as Lily said, that wasn’t guaranteed to last. For example, as long as Sakagami continued to do whatever he wanted, it was only a matter of time before he left the group.

There would also be those who didn’t like fighting. Rebelling against it wouldn’t really be a problem. They had been faced with an emergency situation. They felt a sense of solidarity with their fellow Japanese students and were carried by the atmosphere in a sort of escape from reality. That was what spurred their current actions. But they were all born in modern Japan. They still possessed their sense of values. There were sure to be people who desired a quiet life unrelated to battle sooner than later.

Everything Lily said made sense. However, her proposal itself was an entirely different matter.

Say farewell to all of them and live normally in this world? I couldn’t possibly agree to that. It wasn’t even worth considering. My desire was to live together with everyone. Living on my own would be putting the cart before the horse.

I couldn’t understand. Lily was supposed to be the one who knew my thoughts on this matter more than anyone else in the world. So why would she say such a thing? She already knew what I would say...

“I want to hear your answer, Master. Please. Tell me.”

Lily’s quiet voice tickled my ear.

Seriously, what's going through her head? This wasn't a thoughtless question. I trusted her. I trusted her more than anyone. What spurred her on to make such a proposal? What point was there in giving her my obvious reply?

And yet, I could feel her desire to hear my words through our mental path as she wrapped her palm around my cheek. As such, I had no reason to hesitate in replying.

"I won't accept a proposal like that. I've never even thought of such a thing."

I stretched my hand up to Lily's cheek. It was soft, warm, and adorable. This warmth at the tip of my fingers was precious to me. I knew from the very bottom of my heart that I didn't want to lose this. I had no intention of hiding it.

"I don't plan on letting any of you go. No matter what happens. Unconditionally."

All of my feelings were conveyed through my words, my expression, and our mental path. As proof of that, this time Lily smiled in a truly happy manner.

"Thank you, Master. Sorry for being selfish. I wanted to hear you say it."

Now that I thought of it, she did say she wanted to hear my answer. She knew what it was, but she wanted to hear it. That was all this was.

"Mm. Thanks to that, I feel like I can finally resolve myself..."

She mentioned resolve. It seemed the resolve I felt through our mental path was regarding something else entirely. Lily did say she had two proposals. This exchange must have been something like a ritual to harden her resolve to suggest something else.

"Can you let me know what this second suggestion of yours is?" I asked.

Lily nodded. "Mm. It's not really some wild idea or anything. Actually, there's no way I could come up with anything that crazy. I think you probably faintly realized this yourself, even if I don't go out of my way to tell you." Lily's smile was somewhat bitter. "It's frankly impossible for us to solve all our problems by ourselves."

"That's..."

"Especially the acquisition of a translation runestone and learning how to use

it. It's way too hard for us to do while keeping all of our circumstances hidden."

I couldn't object. In truth, I kept saying we would eventually come up with something, but I didn't have a single clue as to how. We couldn't do it on our own. We were in a deadlock. That much was certainly true. So, what was I supposed to do?

The answer was obvious from the very beginning.

"We just need to find someone who'll cooperate with us. Is that what you're suggesting?"

"Mm." Lily waited for me to arrive at the answer on my own and nodded. "We ask for help after explaining a certain amount of our circumstances. We can just withhold the other stuff. For example, we want to leave the fortress but we don't want other people to know. We can mention that much, right?"

It was a reasonable suggestion. We had managed to survive by cooperating together, joining forces, and standing against monsters. Everything was either a servant or an enemy. It was very simple. It was just a choice of fighting or not.

We were no longer in the wilds of the Woodlands, however. I had stepped foot into human territory. There was no way it would go like before. I was aware of this the entire time, and yet I never even thought of finding someone to assist us. This was largely due to my distrust of humans.

But I couldn't afford to be at a standstill here. Nothing would change like that. Humans were definitely creatures who betrayed others. The terrible spectacle at the Colony proved that. It was a tragedy born of human foolishness. But that didn't mean every human was filthy.

Katou Mana, for example. She was the girl one year younger than me whom I was sheltering. She had saved me. She'd known I distrusted her, and yet she still lent me her strength. Her existence proved the world wasn't only filled with betrayal.

Not all people who lived in this world needed to be suspected in everything they did. This was a pretty obvious reality which didn't really deserve mentioning, but it was also something I absolutely couldn't admit before.

As I was now, I could accept Lily's proposal of "we should try relying on

someone else.” So long as we couldn’t solve our situation on our own, someone who could help us was indispensable.

We couldn’t deny the possibility of them betraying us, of course. That was why it was my job as the leader of our group to probe the humans before me. It wasn’t my job to distrust everyone so that we wouldn’t be betrayed, it was to discover someone who wouldn’t betray us.

If I couldn’t do that, then I shouldn’t have left the Woodlands. I should’ve just listened to the sounds of ruin slowly closing in on us and lived a short yet tranquil life with my servants in both body and heart.

I get it. Logically, I get it. Life would be far simpler if everyone could convey their feelings so easily. Unveiling our secrets to find a cooperator was no different than trusting them.

Just the thought of that sent a detestable feeling crawling up my spine. An iron stench filled my nostrils, flames surrounded my vision, my entire body twisted with pain, and warped smiles assaulted my spirit. It was the same flashback I had that one time with Gerbera. My heart felt dry. All of my flesh felt like it was rotting.

However, I couldn’t yield to this. I clenched my jaw. I had to surpass this abominable memory. That was my responsibility as the leader.

But am I even capable of that? A sickness of the heart. A trauma. I couldn’t even talk to Mikihiko about it. The realities of death and betrayal remained deeply scarred in my heart. It was somewhat hackneyed putting it into words like this, but the curse that coiled around my spirit like thick sludge couldn’t be removed all that easily. A weak human like me needed something so they could surmount—

“It’s okay.”

My vision was suddenly blocked. The hand on my cheek had moved. Lily’s palm was now covering my eyes. No longer able to see, a voice which seemed even sweeter than usual sank into my ears.

“Master, do you remember when we first met in that cave?”

I was bewildered by the sudden and unexpected question, but I still answered

right away.

“Yeah. I remember. There’s no way I could forget.”

Steeped in despair and having given up on life, Lily’s very existence saved me in an immeasurable way. I would die before I forgot that moment.

“It’s an extremely important memory to me,” Lily said. “It’s my first memory after being born. At that time, you prayed from the bottom of your heart for someone to save you. When I heard that voice, when you wished for me, when you gave ‘me’ the name Lily, I was born into this world...”

Lily’s eager voice spoke of her memories as if she was holding a precious treasure to her chest. But her next words sat at the tip of her tongue for a moment.

“However, that wish you made before losing consciousness, ‘save me,’ wasn’t meant for a monster like me, right? There’s no way you would’ve thought a monster would save you. So, who was it you wished to save you...?”

I felt like Lily smiled as if the answer was perfectly obvious. Though, with her hand over my eyes, I couldn’t confirm whether she was actually smiling.

“Master. You say that you don’t trust humans, but in your final moment, you trusted a stranger. I believe that’s your true self.”

“My true...self...?”

“Mm. It’s precisely because you’re like that that we were born as we are. So, it’s okay.” Lily’s voice trembled ever so slightly as she spoke. “When you talk with Kaneki, when you train with Shiran, you really look like you’re enjoying yourself. Just by watching, it makes me happy too.”

“Lily...?”

“It was the same when Katou collapsed before we came here. You didn’t hesitate to make sure she was okay. You may not have noticed it yourself, though...” Lily removed her hand from my eyes. “Your wounds have already healed, Master. All that’s left is for something to give you that little push so you can take a step forward.”

My vision returned, and before me was the girl who was more beloved to me

than anyone else, smiling down at me. But if she was smiling this entire time, there was no need for her to cover my eyes.

“Sorry, Master. I should’ve told you this earlier,” Lily confessed, as if she were ashamed. “I was worried. I was worried you would reconcile with humans. And if you did, the day would come when you no longer needed to keep your servants by your side.”

This was the first time Lily told me about the anxiety she had been carrying in her heart. Even so, looking up at her faint smile and sad expression, I could tell this had been tormenting her for a long time now.

“There’s no way I would ever abandon any of you,” I reassured her.

“Mm. I know that... But I was still worried.”

She was anxious because it was that important to her. In short, this was proof of the yearning she had for me.

“The reason I can be by your side is because I met you at that precise time you called out. But just as I said, you weren’t looking for me, a monster, to save you... That’s why I always wondered whether you originally should’ve met someone else there. No matter where I go, I’m nothing more than a fake, so maybe I was just an elaborate imitation of what you truly desired...”

Lily wasn’t completely and utterly off the mark. Say, for argument’s sake, it wasn’t Lily who saved me, but another human. The tremendous trust I currently placed in Lily would have been directed at the one who saved me from such a hopeless crisis.

That was just how meaningful it was to be saved from the depths of despair. In fact, Mikihiro had gone through a similar experience, which was the source of his deep affection for the commander of the Alliance Knights. The only difference was that our positions were inverted.

This was of course a meaningless supposition. In reality, I had been saved by Lily. That was the one and only truth. That in itself was important to me. However, this wasn’t enough to settle the matter with Lily. Just thinking of that possibility made her feel indebted for what had happened. And that feeling of obligation gave birth to her anxiety, that it shouldn’t have been her who was

there. This was what caused her endless worries.

If, for example, she was a human, she might not have felt such anxiety. But I was a human and Lily was a monster. Nevertheless, I loved her, and she loved me back. We were still different creatures, however. It was perhaps inevitable she'd start to worry.

"I'm sorry for hiding it until now."

I shook my head. "Don't apologize. The important thing here isn't that you kept quiet. It's that when it became necessary, you earnestly conveyed your feelings to me."

"Master..."

"Lily, even as your worries stifled you, you cheered me up with your words. I should be thanking you."

Lily was fighting with the anxieties in her heart. She fought and fought, and after conquering them, she spoke the words I needed to hear. There was no way I could complain about that and want an apology.

"You sure are strong, Lily."

"That's not true."

Lily's flaxen hair shook about as she denied my praise. She peered into my eyes, then spoke in a tone as if she was unveiling her secrets.

"The reason I can speak openly about my worries like this is because you relied on me, you know?"

"...Ah."

I recalled the tears I once saw from Lily and was suddenly taken aback. It was back when I was ambushed by blowfoxes and returned from the verge of death. Thanks to Lily crying and telling me, "Don't carry everything on your own," and, "I want you to rely on us," I learned how I should be facing these girls and also grew to rely on them.

And that supported Lily now. The reality that I depended on her gave her strength and brought a smile to her face. She was proud this was her way of life as a servant. I was wholly charmed by her proud smile. I suddenly realized the

fetters that had been tying me down lost a lot of their strength.

There were those warped smiles driven by madness still stuck in my memories.

And here there was the reassuring smile this girl showed me despite her own anxieties.

There was no need for me to compare the two to tell which had the bigger impact on me.

In short, I was the same as Lily. The most important thing to me right now was being their master. And what kind of master would I be if I acted so weak-minded when my servants were trying so hard for me? Just that single thought led me to a truth that had always been there. Her very existence supported my weak self.

I'm really glad I met Lily in that cave. The moment I thought that, the love I had for the girl in front of my eyes burst open.

“Lily.”

Unaware to even myself, I stretched out the hand I had on Lily's cheek and pulled her in. It was pushing things a little with our current posture, but Lily docilely brought her face close to mine as I embraced her.



As we pressed our lips against each other, our movements grew more and more intense. I wanted to convey this feeling I had in my heart to her. If I wished for it single-mindedly, it would come true. Our feelings melted together as they traveled through our mental path using our lips. The border which separated us gradually became more and more vague.

“...Master.”

Lily called me lovingly as we both took a breath. Any sense of reason she had left was completely numb. The bright red tip of her tongue lapped at my lips, but her enchanted gaze averted to the side for just an instant.

“Sorry, Asarina. Could you let me have our master all to myself for just one night?”

I followed her eyes. Before I knew it, one of her arms shifted back into slime form and several feelers stretched out. They wrapped around Asarina’s vine-like external body and gently pushed her into my left hand. One feeler then stretched out all the way to the wall and turned off the light.

Now draped in darkness, our breaths drew closer once more and intertwined. From there, we simply confirmed our love for each other.

Chapter 8: The Puppet's Challenge *Rose's POV*

I filed down the piece of wood in my hand. It was already mostly the right shape. This was the finishing touch, so to say, to turn my imagination into reality. I couldn't lose my focus here. Not that there was any step in this work where that was acceptable anyway.

This required the delicacy to polish off a work of art. Although, I hadn't ever seen what people would call a work of art. I just understood the concept of valuing beauty over practicality. Such was art. The item I was working on now could be classified as such.

Thus, I had to be meticulous beyond measure. Just by altering the angle of my filing ever so slightly, I could change the appearance of what I was creating by a startling amount. That was why I couldn't lose my focus for an instant. To carry out my work, I needed to concentrate hard enough to erase all other thoughts from my mind.

Considering what this was, making it excessively gaudy could be seen as superfluous. But considering what exactly it was for, I felt like no matter how perfectly beautiful it was, it wouldn't be enough.

Right now, I was creating something for myself.

By my own will, I was creating my own possession.

This was exceedingly unusual.

I created things for others all the time. I also created things for myself at my master's command. That was how it had been until now. However, I had never created anything I wanted for myself.

In that sense, this was in fact my very first possession. Not only that, but upon its completion, it would become a part of what constituted my being, which was why I didn't want it to be overly ostentatious. I didn't believe such a thing would suit me. It was beyond my means.

However, though it was something for myself, it wasn't necessarily essential.

After all, it wasn't something I could normally see. Only others would be able to see it in my every-day life. More importantly, my master would see it. His opinion meant more than anyone else's. With that thought in mind, no matter how hard I tried, it felt like I couldn't possibly try too hard.

"It's done."

After I placed the final touch, an elaborately fabricated "girl's face" lay in my hand. Her age was about the same as my master's. She had well-defined features, but there were places that stood out a little characteristically. Her skin was a little too white, but it was smooth to the touch, just like a girl. The calm air she gave off was what gave me the most trouble to put together.

"How is it?" I asked my friend who was watching me work from the side as I handed her the finished product.

This was my collaborator. She possessed no ability as a crafter herself, but my work could never have taken such a direction without her. She scrutinized the object from many angles. Her gloomy expression, the bonfire-lit cave, and the elaborate piece in her hands made her look like some sort of ghastly witch.

"Hmm." A sigh slipped from her thin lips.

She was about to give her opinion. If I possessed the organs to gulp, I surely would have done so.

"It's perfect."

"So..."

My friend, Katou Mana, leaned toward me and smiled ever so faintly.

"Make another one."



Three days had passed since we parted ways with my master. According to our discussions beforehand, we had predicted the knights would make their way out of the forest and into a town. We never expected them to guide Lily and our master to that manner of a fortress, however. If something horrible were to happen and we needed to rush in, this was extremely inconvenient for us.

But that didn't really change what we had to do. We were to wait for contact from my master, and if we sensed he was in an emergency through our mental path, we were to hasten to join him no matter the difficulties. To accomplish that, it was preferable to stay as close to my master as possible.

As such, we had explored the mountain that had a view of the fortress and found a moderately sized cave to stay in. The cave itself was apparently a nesting hole dug out by some monster, but either the owner was killed long ago or it wasn't anywhere nearby.

"Where does it need improvement, Katou?" I asked my friend as we sat in the cave.

"...Mana." A short response...or rather, a simple complaint. She gave me a reproachful look. Her eyes truly suited her. "Please call me Mana."

This girl, who recently became my friend, had asked me to call her Mana. I still wasn't used to it. Sometimes I would slip up, much like I just did, and she would sulk in response.

"Mana, where would you say it needs work?"

"It's not that it's bad or anything," Mana said as her lips relaxed a little. "It's just... How to put it? I feel like there isn't enough of human emotion to it."

"Human emotion, is it?"

I repeated Mana's words—using my own mouth. Yes, right now, I tried installing the new head I finished. I had yet to succeed in fabricating a vocal chord that moved like a human's, so in truth, my mouth was only moving to match my voice. But at a glance, it must've looked like I was speaking words with my mouth.

This piece I'd just finished making was to be my face as a girl. It was my first step toward getting my master to hug me. Based purely on its shape, I was confident it was perfect, just like Mana had said.

The path to reach this level was in no way easy. I actually possessed a fair amount of pride in my abilities as a crafter. Being able to shape wood into anything exactly as my mind willed it was my specialty as a magical puppet.

Yes. Exactly as my mind willed it. But that also meant I couldn't create something my mind couldn't picture. I first realized this when I began working on this piece. Shaping a human face wasn't anything like my normal work. Not to mention, the purpose of this project was entirely different from my previous ones.

My work before this prioritized functionality. My pieces were practical and unrefined. However, what I was trying to make now was essentially a work of art. Even though I was using the same materials and tools, with such a different goal, the techniques inevitably differed.

Even a deviation as small as a millimeter could break the entire balance. A careless move could even make it look wholly inhuman. The first trial piece I had made was so bad I didn't even want to remember it.

This work was a difficult journey. And that was only a matter of course. Having said that, I couldn't possibly give up. If I were to quit now, I wouldn't have even started. What's more, I had already promised my master I would show it to him one day. I no longer had a choice.

What had followed was an accumulation of practice and incremental improvement. Incidentally, there had been times I couldn't help but feel that something was out of place no matter how many trial pieces I made. It honestly had me panicking. If Mana hadn't taught me this was because I was approaching the territory called the "uncanny valley," my trials might've come to a complete standstill.

When attempting to create something closely modeled after a human, there was a certain level of similarity where the minute differences from the real thing actually stood out more. This caused an uncanny feeling even though the item looked more "human" than before. This was apparently what the phenomenon called the uncanny valley entailed.

For me to surmount this, I had to get even closer to a real human. I had made dozens of trial pieces since then. Mana would point out what was wrong with each one, and I improved my work for the next attempt. Even I lost count of how many trial pieces I had made by now.

Mana patiently kept me company in this endless repetition of trial and error.

It was no exaggeration to call this a collaborative project between the both of us. Because of that, the faces I made all resembled Mana in one way or another. They had the same childish features she had. If we were to stand side by side, we would look like sisters. That was, if I could do something about this “human emotion” she spoke of.

“Well, let’s forget about that part for now. There’s another major problem,” Mana said in her usual flat tone.

It was difficult to picture from her meager change in expression, but this was her being motivated. I knew this. Everything she pointed out to me was in fact largely pertinent. It was all helpful in improving my trials.

“Your facial expression isn’t very well-made. The shape is very human-like now, but...it’s actually too perfect, so it loses all human emotion. Kinda like some sort of angel. Anyway, the expression’s no good.” Mana stared at my face, or rather, she observed its details. “Your technique has improved to the point where you’d be indistinguishable from a human if you just stood there silently. But that just highlights the feeling that something is out of place when it comes to the minute movements of your expression. Your mouth and your voice are also out of sync. Once you correct all that, you can do something about your facial features being too perfect. Actually, no matter how human you make the shape, it’s all wasted if the facial expression is no good.”

“I am aware of this fact, but I just can’t seem to do anything about it... Is it that bad?”

“Honestly, it’s creepy.”

We had exchanged opinions many, many times now. There was no need to hold back out of unnecessary consideration. Mana pointed out the flaws in my design in a straightforward manner, as she always did, while I accepted her criticism and doubted my work, as I always did. I couldn’t possibly advance without criticism. Regardless, I couldn’t help but feel depressed.

“I think the feeling of the skin and such is great.”

Perhaps having read my inner thoughts, Mana stretched out her hand and touched my cheek. Her fingertips pressed against me and softly sank in.

“It’s thanks to your advice, Mana.”

“Heehee. I’m glad it went as I imagined. There was your pseudo-Damascus steel sword and the black armor you’ve been making lately. The magic tools you make change greatly from the wood they’re made out of once you finish them, so I thought you’d be able to do something like this too. Looks like I was dead-on.”

If I could change wood into a material as hard as steel, then it stood to reason I could make it as soft as human skin. That was Mana’s logic. I couldn’t have come up with that on my own.

“I wondered how it would go when you suggested it, but it was entirely doable after trying. Although, it’s difficult to give this full points as well.”

It passed, but it was still far away from a perfect score. That was how I felt about it too. For example, the skin was strangely white because I couldn’t reproduce blood flowing beneath it. This was, at most, an imitation. Even when cut, the skin didn’t shed blood or anything. There weren’t any pores either, so it was obvious this was a fabrication upon closer inspection.

I also couldn’t express myself with this face. I couldn’t replicate the movement of muscles beneath the skin, and I couldn’t create natural wrinkles. This was partially the reason I was trying to make the face look calm, so as to suppress any unnatural feelings it gave off. If my range of expressions was limited, then I just had to make it so that it didn’t matter. That was the idea, anyway. It worked, but it was merely a makeshift solution.

And just like that, after encountering several insurmountable technical limitations, the face I had now looked inorganic. This wasn’t the face of a human girl. It was the face of a puppet. Having said that, for a human-like puppet, I found it to be pretty well-made. It felt like a waste to alter it.

“In any case, it’s all thanks to you that I’ve managed to come this far, Mana.”

“You did touch my face a countless number of times, after all.”

Mana pulled back her hand from my face and touched her own. She had let me feel her face many times over for use as a reference. This was Mana’s suggestion. And thanks to her, I was confident I could at least faithfully

reproduce the feeling of a girl's skin.

“Well, you'll just have to keep working on the expression. One way or the other, it isn't really a hardware problem, more of a software... I mean, you just lack the ability to manipulate it, Rose.”

“I have nothing to say for myself. Unlike my arms and legs, I have never moved such things before.”

“I'm sure you'll get better with practice. Let's do our best, okay?” Mana said to cheer me on, but she immediately looked somewhat sad. “Although, I don't think I'm the right person to teach you about this.”

“Is that so...? Why?”

“It's not quite the same as a baby mimicking their surroundings, but the fundamentals of learning really are in imitation. On that point, my expressions don't show very well.”

Mana was apparently aware of how coldhearted she appeared. If she were to smile more like a blooming flower, much like Lily did, I was sure her appearance would change quite drastically. However, Mana would never smile like that. Thinking of her circumstances, it was perfectly understandable.

“Oh yeah,” Mana said with a clap of her hands. “How about asking Lily when she gets back from the fortress? I think she's more suitable for this role.”

“No, that's a little...”

I wanted to say it was all Mana's idea, but I stopped myself. It was true my sister's expressions were abundant and charming. As a woman, she was a sort of ideal to me. However, I hesitated to ask her for help.

For some reason, I found it difficult to rely on Lily when it came to these trials I worked on with Mana. This was of course nothing to do with Lily herself. She would undoubtedly agree to help if I asked her for advice regarding my work or for practicing how to make expressions. The problem was me. I somehow felt guilty asking her about this. I didn't know the reason. It was strange, even to me.

To once more experience that dream-like night I had spent in my master's

arms.

That was my wish. I wanted him to hug me close. But my wish was small. There was no reason for me to feel apologetic to my sister for wanting that.

There wasn't supposed to be.

So, why was it?

Because of these incomprehensible feelings within me, I couldn't speak with Lily about these trials. She must have realized this in some way. She knew I was doing something with Mana, but she never touched upon it and simply pretended not to see.

"I guess I've got no choice if you're not inclined to ask her to help," Mana said.

I had consulted her about these matters before. That was why she so easily accepted my reason for refusing her suggestion, even if I had no rational reason for doing so.

"I'm sorry, Mana. I understand that would be an effective means of solving this, but..."

"You don't need to apologize, Rose. I can understand why you feel guilty about it."

Just as she said, Mana didn't really seem to mind. She apparently had an idea what my baffling feelings regarding Lily were, but she wouldn't tell me what that was. She knew I didn't wish for her to tell me.

One reason I wanted to fulfill my wish of being hugged by my master was because I desired to understand the human heart. If I needed to go to others to find the answers regarding my own feelings, I would never be able to understand the hearts of others. I had to find the answer on my own.

Even so, it was true I was wasting Mana's precious advice. I honestly found this rather pathetic of myself, and it made me feel apologetic toward her.

"...Sorry."

"You don't really need to torment yourself so much over it, Rose," Mana said in a gentle voice, perhaps having realized my inner thoughts. Only those closest

to her could tell this was gentle, however. “You’ll find the answer on your own one day even if you don’t rush. If you really want to find out, then you should give some thought to why you want Senpai to hug you.”

“Why I want my master to hug me...?”

“Yes. You said the night Senpai embraced you made you happier than anything else, right? Enough for you to wish for it to happen again. Where did that feeling come from? What emotion lies at its source? Once you realize that, I’m sure you’ll be able to take a step forward.”

Being embraced by the person most dear to me was pleasant. It was enjoyable. It made me happy... Wasn’t that all there was to this emotion? I couldn’t infer any more from it as I was now.

I wasn’t, for example, like Ayame, who simply desired to be touched by our master when she pressed her snout against him. My feelings were pure, but they weren’t innocent. They had this mysterious force to them that could even stimulate my puppet body. It was more complicated, mysterious, and delicate.

I had a hunch. The moment I learned what name this emotion had, I would truly know what a human heart was. And for that day to come, I had to continue thinking about it.

“Very well. I will give it some thought.”

“Yup. Hang in there.” Mana’s lips curved with the slightest hint of satisfaction as she nodded. “Well then, let’s give up on asking Lily for advice regarding this. Though I may not be the best person for this endeavor, I’ll continue teaching you what I can.”

“I’m sure I’ll take up much of your time, but I’ll be in your care.”

“You’re not taking up my time. I’m doing this because I want to. It’s fun to take care of you, Rose.”

I couldn’t tell whether she was saying this out of consideration or whether these were her true feelings. Regardless, I could only thank my friend from the bottom of my heart for her goodwill.

“So, in short, your opinion from here is to continue improving the technical

aspects of the face while practicing how to make expressions?”

“Oh, no.” I was confirming what I should do next, but Mana shook her head. “That would be fine and all, but we’ll end up in a drawn-out battle doing it that way. I think we should change our objective a little here.”

“Meaning?”

“I understand you want to show Majima-senpai something perfect, but I think it would be good to remove all the obstacles in the way of that first.”

“Obstacles...you say?”

Mana nodded. “Did you finish that thing I asked you for last time?”

“That? Yes, it’s done.”

I stood up and walked over to the wall of the cave. Despite making them all myself, there was a mound of discarded prototypes laying there. They were the trials I had made based on the idea of camouflaging my master’s pseudo-Damascus steel sword as well as many other test products. At present, everything there was just a pile of junk. But one day, I wanted to make something my master would praise me for.

“This one?”

I picked up one of the prototypes that had tumbled off the pile and handed it to Mana. It was a white mask, a simple piece that only had openings for the eyes. I had made it the other day at Mana’s request.

“Okay, shall we try out a bunch of things then?” Mana asked.

“Try out...things?”

“Yes, relax. You don’t need to do anything. Just leave everything to me.”

Mana certainly seemed like she was having fun, just as she said she was.



A short while later...

“Perfect,” Mana muttered in satisfaction.

She was saying exactly the same thing as before, but her voice resounded

through the cave differently this time. Why was that?

“Mana, this is...?”

I stood stock-still in bewilderment. I looked down at myself, seeing something altogether different from before. The white clothes Gerbera had made for Lily were now draped over my wooden body. This was the first time I had ever worn clothes, but it was strangely comfortable.

I had the featureless body of a puppet, but with clothes like this, one could see the delicate lines drawn by a woman’s body. I had a protector on over the clothes, which covered the slight protrusion at my chest, and stiff, gray hair flowed down on top of it. The quirky hair was actually fur from a firefang’s tail which had been diligently combed down. It was styled so that the sides came down to my chest, while the hair to my back was tied up in a thick braid which reached my waist.

“It’s a little regrettable, but it looks like it’ll be better to hide your face with a mask.”

Mana, who had been using me quite literally as a dress-up doll, placed the mask on my face. As a result, I looked like nothing more than a gray-haired girl wearing a mask. Only my hands and feet showed I was a puppet now.

“You’ll need gloves. And boots too.”

“Um, Mana?” I was starting to wonder how much more of this I could endure, so I interrupted her before she could continue. “I’m sorry to interrupt your uncharacteristic enjoyment, but... What is this?”

“Oh, right. I haven’t explained anything yet.” Mana cocked her head then answered me in a contented manner. “You want Senpai to recognize you as a woman. This will help accomplish that.”

“I don’t really understand. What do you mean?”

“Up until now, Senpai hasn’t ever thought of you as a woman. Considering his personality, if you want him to treat you like a girl, then you should at least wear clothes. I think it’ll be better if you change his perception regarding this sooner than later.”

“Getting my master to acknowledge me as a woman... Is there a need for that?”

“There is. Rose, you wouldn’t want him to hug you like a baby, like he would for Ayame or Asarina, right?”

“That wouldn’t be so bad...”

But I did feel like it was a little different from what I wanted, so I swallowed my objection. In other words, I approved of dressing up like this. It meant seeing my master in this outfit. Just thinking of that suddenly filled my chest with anxiety.

“...Doesn’t it look strange?” I asked.

“It’s okay. Hiding your face actually has a mysterious charm to it. Hang on...”

Mana took a step back and observed me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. Then she suddenly stepped forward and stretched out her arms.

“Thought so. You get anxious at times like this too. So cute.”

She embraced me tightly. Or rather, considering the difference in our height, it was more like she was clinging to me. I only learned this after getting to know her better, but Mana seemed to have a proclivity to hug others. It was likely she couldn’t fully suppress some sort of emotion within her, causing her to act impulsively like this once in a while. That was my conjecture, at least.

Well, I didn’t dislike my friend hugging me, so I let her do as she liked. What’s more...this was perhaps a remnant of her old self before the horrible events in this world changed her. Thinking of it that way, there was no way I could possibly refuse her affection.

“You’re so cute, Rose.”

It *was* a little frightening to hear her say that in such a flat tone, though. I wondered whether she could put just a little more emotion into her voice, but I quietly returned Mana’s hug.

“...But you’re hard.”

“Isn’t that obvious?” I replied in a rather astonished tone.

Mana remained glued to me as her eyes narrowed in thought.

“We should make some revisions to your body too.”

“Even my body?”

“Yes. We put all our effort into the shape of your face, but that’s a little too focused, isn’t it? It really is no good if a girl isn’t soft all over.”

“It’s no good?”

“Nope.”

So it was no good. I didn’t really understand, but if Mana said so, then it was probably true. I didn’t harbor any doubts in that regard. She was the one who suggested I make it feel like skin as much as possible while I was focused entirely on just getting the appearance right. As a human, she knew much more about humans than me. It was the correct decision to obediently listen to her.

“Understood. I will try to make some.”

“Hang in there. I think it should be easier than making your face.”

“I wonder about that. I’m not all that confident.”

“It’s okay. Even if you skim on the details a little, it won’t be as uncanny as the details on your face. With your skills, I’m sure you’ll be able to make something in no time.”

“It would be nice if that was the case, but regardless, I’d like to put all of my efforts into it,” I said as I nodded at my friend’s encouragement. “Well then, I’m sure I’ll take up more of your time for this, but please lend me your assistance, Mana.”

“Of course,” Mana said with a short nod, but her expressionless eyes shot open.

“...Huh?”

Even as I wondered what was wrong with her, I placed my hands on Mana’s shoulders. The rest of my body was the same as my face; I needed her cooperation if I was going to make it soft as well.

“Huh?”

I really was very obliged to her. And as I vowed to one day repay this debt, I slid my hands down Mana's dainty body.

Chapter 9: The Puppet's Curiosity *Rose's POV*

“...N-Now that it's decided you'll be dressing up as a girl, I guess we should make some clothes for you.”

I gazed at my friend from beneath my mask as she talked more quickly than usual. Mana's face was tinged a faint red as she held her own body, her clothes now somewhat disheveled. She was my close friend, as well as the weak girl my master had charged me with protecting. I could take pride in calling myself her guardian now. Perhaps because I served such a role, Mana's red cheeks and flustered demeanor made her appear sweeter than normal, spurring on a desire to protect her.

In any case, Mana normally didn't act like this, so a certain question came to mind.

I cocked my head. I made an expression. Before I spoke, I prepared my heart to move my mouth. This required a tremendous amount of effort to do in unison. Furthermore, each and every step was delicate and required extremely fine-tuning. I admired the way humans could do this with ease on a normal basis. I didn't doubt that any human possessed far more mental throughput than I did. That was how much I respected them.

I didn't think a day would come when a puppet like me could accomplish this, but nothing could be done by complaining. All I could do was sincerely put in the effort.

“Mana?” After finally completing the complicated chain of actions beneath my mask, I was finally able to ask my friend about the question on my mind. “Your face has been red for a while now. Are you feeling unwell?”

“...No, that's not it. Please don't worry about it. It's just a personal thing.”

Mana averted her gaze. Her reaction was more and more baffling to me. I was starting to get a little worried.

“Are you pushing yourself, Mana? Please tell me right away if you're feeling

unwell. Your constitution isn't very strong, after all."

"No. I'm really okay." Mana waved both her hands in front of her, but she still didn't meet my eyes. "Actually, it may be difficult for you to understand because you're so serious and diligent, but sometimes you can be a little dense..."

"Hm...? It's certainly true that I lack intelligence."

"No, no, no, no. That's not what I mean."

Nothing Mana said was making sense. At this rate, I would master making a confused expression.

"I don't really know what you're saying, but the prospects for my next piece are looking bright thanks to you. For the time being, I'm thinking of starting with the upper body now that I have finished confirming what it should feel like. I do believe I'll require your cooperation once more, so please lend me a hand when the time comes."

"A-Again...?"

"Is there a problem?"

"N-No... Understood."

Mana trembled in place as if she was trying to endure something. Her breathing was shallow and her childish face was now bright red.



Is her reaction maybe...? I continued to observe Mana's face when I came to a sudden realization. When I was in the middle of determining what I needed to create my upper body, I had vaguely sensed this was maybe the case, but... Was Mana perhaps feeling shy? If so, why would that be?

I couldn't fathom any reason for her to be bashful. It was Mana's idea that I learn by touch to begin with. Even if I still needed to adjust some aspects, I had succeeded in creating an elaborate face through this process. I had simply moved from touching her face to touching her body. I didn't see any reason I shouldn't after all this time.

And yet, why was Mana feeling shy? I tried imagining myself in her position. Understanding the subtleties of human emotion was a major subject I was trying to unravel. From a purely objective standpoint, Mana was an incredibly good research subject, seeing how she was equipped with the delicacy and complexity of a human girl. Furthermore, aside from my master, she was the closest human to me and my intimate friend. I could never get bored thinking of her.

"...Hmm."

A thought came to mind. According to what I had learned about humans from my teacher Mana, human males were quite interested in the female body. And females paid the same amount of attention to their own figures, maybe even more. To be specific, their breasts, hips, buttocks, legs, and such. There were portions of this that didn't really strike a chord with me, considering I was a monster and technically asexual, but I could understand the logic. So, it wasn't impossible for me to consider things under that assumption.

The thought that came to mind was perhaps Mana was worried about her meager figure compared to Lily's. I was touching portions of her body that she was shy about, so her body trembled with embarrassment. From that perspective, it made sense.

In that case, it was perhaps my job as her friend to support her here. Mana had nothing to be ashamed of, after all. That was the conclusion I came to. Thus, I nodded once and called her out.

"You don't need to worry, Mana. I find your body to be very cute."

“Uuuuh...”

Mana covered her bright red face with both hands and sank to the floor. It was a fatal blow.



“Please excuse me for saying something so careless,” I said as I lowered my head.

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

Mana was still crouching on the ground. Her hands were still covering her face, and her ears peeking through her hair were still bright red.

As a small digression, I would only learn it was embarrassing for humans to expose their skin to others some time after this. It would only come to me after I started habitually wearing clothes and got an actual feel for the sensation myself. That is to say nothing of the deeds which were referred to as “going further,” like touching and groping. I was far too inexperienced at this time.

“But Mana, you could’ve told me if you didn’t like it.”

Mana, with her knees fully bent as she crouched down, peeked through the gaps of her fingers and glanced up at me.

“...It’s not that I disliked it or anything.” There was the slightest hint of resentment in her eyes. “But you know, I feel like I’ll awaken to something. I mean, you’re tall, and slender, and cool. Your voice is calm, and deep too. From a girl’s view, it’s like, heart-fluttering, you know? And now you don’t look all that different from us... Well, I guess that’s my fault for dressing you up, though.”

“Ummm, Mana? I feel like you’re complimenting me, but not... Awaken? Fluttering? What does that—?”

“Nothing, that was just a joke. It’s a bit troubling you’re so deadly serious about it... Yup. Just a joke. I’m kidding. That was just some friendly touching among fellow girls. Yup. Friendly...”

Mana hid her face once more. It was as if she was trying to convince herself of something. I couldn’t understand her behavior at all.

“Mana?”

“Next time, please let me wash myself first.”

I cocked my head at Mana’s request. “Wash yourself? Yes, understood.”

“You don’t *really* understand, huh... Well, whatever.” After letting out a sigh, Mana shook her head and rose to her feet. “Anyway, I think we should get you some clothes of your own.”

“Clothes of my own?”

I merely repeated Mana’s statement after she seemingly managed to regain her composure. It was probably best not to mention there was still a tinge of red on her face. I at least understood that much.

“Are you going to ask Gerbera to make me my own clothes?”

“Yes. While we’re at it, we might as well have something made which suits you.”

“You want to change the design? I don’t particularly mind having something the same as this,” I stated while pointing at Lily’s clothes.

“That won’t do,” Mana replied immediately, rejecting my proposal outright. “You hear me, Rose? Every day for a girl is war. Your clothes are your sword, spear, axe, and even your bow, so to speak. You can’t go to battle with clothes that have such a lack of sex appeal.”

“...These are Lily’s clothes, though.”

“You can’t use something so unfair as a reference.”

“Um, my sister isn’t really being unfair or anything.”

“She’s so beautiful, and cute, and the type to fully devote herself to the person she likes. On top of that, she’s a slightly perverted predatory type. She’s connected to Senpai’s heart with the mental path, her feelings go right through to him, and they’re always basically whispering love poems into each other’s ears. What would you call all that if not unfair?”

Mana essentially threw out every complaint she could think of. But I did feel like there were some parts I could agree with.

“Don’t you want to dress yourself up more while you’re at it so you can show Senpai?”

“That’s...true. You’re exactly right.”

“So, it’s decided. Let’s go ask Gerbera.”

Once Mana convinced me, she dove right into action. This part of her truly was reliable. And she occasionally taught me how important some parts of me, which I hadn’t really worried about before, were to a girl.

I was usually the one worrying about her, the powerless Mana. However, in instances like these, the roles were reversed. And yet the reason I could progress without feeling overly indebted to her was precisely because she was Mana. We helped each other in a way that was slightly different from how I idolized my elder sister and how she loved me in return as her little sister. This was surely what being friends meant.

With such thoughts going through my mind, I chased after Mana’s back as she walked off.

“Huh?”

Mana only took a few steps before she came to a stop. I caught up to her, wondering what was going on, and found her staring at the entrance of the cave with her head cocked to the side.

“Gerbera’s not here,” she said.

“She isn’t? That can’t be.”

Gerbera had left the cave a short while ago, saying she was going to stand guard. I assumed she would be right outside making clothes for our master or something.

“I wonder if she went to take a look at the fortress?” Mana said.

By climbing the cliff this cave was located on and pushing through the trees a bit, we could get an unobstructed view of the fortress my master had gone to. We couldn’t see him by eye like this, of course, but at least it was something. Even I walked over that way several times a day.

Gerbera in particular went to look quite frequently. Three nights ago, she felt

like her eyes had met those of the blonde woman who seemed to be a sentry, and she came back with her face pale. I had told her in great detail to be more careful after that, but...

“No, I don’t think she went to see the fortress,” I said, shaking my head. “Gerbera is not so foolish that she would leave without telling us anything.”

“That’s true. So I guess she’s somewhere nearby...”

Mana took a few steps out of the cave’s entrance but came to a stop once more. I curiously followed her and looked out over her shoulder. There was a white spider right outside. This was obviously Gerbera. She was squatting down to the side of the cave’s entrance, in a position where she couldn’t be seen from the inside.

She was apparently properly fulfilling her role as a sentry. So there wasn’t a problem here. Gerbera could be a little absentminded, so it sometimes made me anxious that something unexpected could happen, but it turned out I was needlessly worrying. I felt a sense of relief...until I realized something was strange about her. Perhaps...it would be more accurate to say I was made to realize.

“Heh, heheh... Heheh. Heheheh. Heheheheheh...”

The girl in white wore a slackened smile. Her expression was almost slovenly. Her face was so well featured it was practically excessive, yet it possessed none of the inorganic feeling mine did. Her beautiful face was basically a miracle, and here it was in an utterly disappointing state.

“Teehee, hee, heeheehee.”

Gerbera was in a trance, staring at something in her arms. I wondered what it was and took a closer look, spotting a white cocoon woven from spider threads. This was apparently what had twisted her beautiful features.

“Heheheh... heh?”

Just one moment after we witnessed her like this, Gerbera, who was supposed to possess keen senses, finally noticed us. She vigorously turned her head, her red eyes reflecting our image. Her slackened smile visibly spasmed.

“Fwah?!”

A hysterical scream. Time froze over. Mana, myself, and even Gerbera all stiffened up and didn't move a muscle. We saw something we shouldn't have seen. Meaning she had placed herself out of sight from inside the cave on purpose.

“...Is that you, Rose?”

“Y-Yes.”

Now that she mentioned it, my outer appearance was totally different from usual. I was so shocked by this situation that I had completely forgotten.

“I had a slight idea in mind, so I ended up dressing like this.”

“I-I see.”

“By the way, Gerbera, what were you...?”

“I-I-I-I-I-I was...”

Gerbera's mouth was flapping open and shut. She was apparently extremely embarrassed, seeing how her almost transparent, white skin was now bright red. She had lost the ability to speak, and an awkward silence sank over the area.

This was a first for me, so I had no idea what to do. Actually, strictly speaking, this wasn't the very first time I had witnessed such a situation. Seeing something I wasn't meant to see did in fact happen once before when I walked in on my master and Lily sharing a bed and kissing while naked. That was apparently something I wasn't supposed to witness. I remembered how my master had an extremely awkward look when he saw me. I was dense to such sensibilities at the time, so I didn't really think much of it back then. But now I was different. It was exceedingly awkward. I could clearly sense my own growth at this moment. Although, I would've preferred it to have happened in a different manner.

Gerbera didn't move. We had our difficulties up until now, so though imperfect, I still recognized this girl as my little sister. And here she was, her mind in a mess, on the verge of tears, and her porcelain cheeks so red it felt like

they were burning. It was like she would go flying away if I poked her ever so slightly with my finger. I couldn't move carelessly.

I spontaneously turned to Mana for help. She noticed my gaze one beat later and opened her eyes in shock as if to say, "Huh? Me?" as her lips pursed.

"Uhhh, ummm. Right." Mana hectically tried to think of what to say. Her voice sounded flustered. "Mizushima-senpai once told me certain types of spiders wrap their eggs in cocoons, I think..."

"I-Is that so...?"

Thinking back on it now, relying on Mana here wasn't a very good choice. Mana was wise and sensitive to the subtleties of the heart, but her insight usually manifested itself after she had prepared herself beforehand. In short, she wasn't very good at adapting. Much like how she was when I stripped off her clothes, just going with the flow of events. On the other hand, I felt so awkward that it took everything I had just to nod along with whatever she said.

"Eggs aside, I don't believe Gerbera has participated in any reproductive activities. Not with our master, at least."

"Oh, no. I'm not saying she's doing it with someone other than Senpai or anything. What I'm getting at is, um, in short, she's probably practicing for the future."

"Practicing?"

As I curiously repeated what she said, Mana courteously began explaining, perhaps out of habit from our regular conversations.

"To put it in simple humans terms, it's kind of like how some people will make baby clothes for a baby they could one day have with the person they love."

"Even though they're not in that sort of relationship yet? Is that fun?"

In retrospect, Mana shouldn't have put it so bluntly. And I shouldn't have asked for more details so casually. It was a massive failure on both our parts.

"—!"

Gerbera, now as red as red could be, let out a wordless scream and ran off in tears.



“What a misstep,” Mana muttered, her expression uneasy. “I didn’t mean to upset her...”

“You were just trying to tell her it couldn’t be helped because it was a spider’s instinct, right?”

“Yes. Well, that’s true, but it can still be embarrassing precisely because it’s instinct. I chose the wrong way to cheer her up.”

“...It’s quite difficult, isn’t it?”

After Gerbera came back to her senses and returned, we asked her to make some clothes for me and then left her behind to go to the spot where we could see the fortress. This was because it was very awkward to be close to Gerbera when her face was still red and her eyes still watery. We had done something bad to her. Mana and I reflected on that as we ascended the hill together.

“Hrm?”

I pushed through the thickets indifferently as I always did when my clothes got caught on a branch. It was a little annoying. It seemed it would take some time before I got used to this. I slammed the haft of my axe into the ground and used it as support while I held my hand out to Mana.

“Are you okay, Mana?”

“I-I’m fine.”

She was a little out of breath, but she still took my hand and climbed up to where I was.

“Let’s take a break,” I suggested.

“N-No. There’s...no need,” Mana replied. She kept her hands on her knees as she got her breathing in order. “I’ve been living in the forest for a while now. After all that, I’ve gotten used to walking outdoors and have built up some stamina. You don’t need to worry.”

“You still have a small build, though. Your body is also delicate and fragile, so I can’t help but worry.”

“Rose, you can be a little overprotective sometimes, you know?” she said with a bitter smile. “Well, I’m honestly happy for it.”

“It’s only been three days since you collapsed, Mana. Of course I’d be worried.”

According to our original plans, Mana was supposed to be together with my master in that fortress. But then right before they were to depart, her health suddenly deteriorated.

“My master also seemed rather worried about you. Please pay more attention to your own well-being.”

Mana’s shoulders jolted. “Really? Is that how Majima-senpai looked to you?”

“Yes. You’ve been on my master’s mind lately. No. Even before that. He just didn’t let it show. That’s what I believe.”

My master spoke with Mana more than he did before. This had happened after the evening he gave me permission to teach Mana about magic. That night, something shifted within him. I couldn’t imagine what caused this change in mental state, but I could sense it definitely wasn’t bad for him.

From the very beginning, my master worried about Mana, even though he threw around vague reasons for doing so. Even when he distrusted her and kept his guard up, I still remembered instances where he spoke to her with consideration.

The very fact that he had gone out of his way to bring her along, despite her being nothing but a hindrance, made his personality apparent. Thinking back on it now, my master used the word “responsibility” quite often back then.

He certainly did have a strong sense of responsibility. But when he used that word regarding Mana, it was as if he was using it as some sort of excuse. My master, despite his distrust and hate for humans, had unconsciously made excuses to save that girl in the hut. I felt this was indeed the case.

I don’t know what triggered it, but lately, my master had been outwardly showing his consideration. As a result, he and Mana had more opportunities to converse than before. The scene of them encouraging each other as they learned to use mana had become commonplace. Seeing them like that honestly

made me happy.

They came from the same place, had similar circumstances, and were both human. As one would expect, Mana seemed to enjoy talking to him. When he called her, she often looked happy. Mana's expressions were very faint, but having spent so much time merely watching her, I could see the slight movements of her lips. It didn't seem like my master had noticed this, however.

"I guess I shouldn't make Majima-senpai worry. Okay, let's take a break." Mana brushed back her pigtails and gave me a nod.

After we rested, we proceeded up the hill while taking periodic breaks. Before long, we arrived at a small cliff. I gazed off toward the sturdy-looking fortress, discolored over the long passage of time. That was where my master was. How was he doing about now? How close had he gotten to his objective? Was there anything troubling or confusing him?

Before I knew it, my attention was focused solely on the fortress towering over the hole in the dense forest. I wasn't glued to my master like Lily was, but even so, I hadn't gone a day since gaining an ego without seeing his face. Maybe that was why the thought of him being so far away left me somehow restless.

I wanted to be by his side. I wanted to protect him, no matter the cost. My body was his shield. That was my role as his servant. It was my long-cherished ambition to fulfill that, even if my body were to be reduced to splinters. As such, it was only natural for me to want to be by his side as a servant...

But there was another feeling present within my puppet's heart. It was the pure feeling of simply wanting to be near him. It had nothing to do with fulfilling my role as his servant. I just wanted to be by my master's side and feel his presence. This was clearly the same reason I wanted my master to hug me.

I no longer cast away such emotions as presumptuous or ignorantly arrogant. They were now dear to me, and I held them close to my heart. This was solely thanks to the friend at my side. She had taught me I couldn't kill my emotions. She had admonished me, telling me the effort I put in as a girl to fulfill my desire of my master hugging me couldn't be denied by anyone. She had told me I couldn't give up. She had encouraged me, saying my wish could be granted.

I would never forget the day Mana became my friend. That was the turning point. Ever since that day, her words supported me, granting me the ability to face my own heart. I hoped that one day, I would be able to attach a name to this emotion. And if I could convey that feeling to my master...

“ ... ”

How long had I spent gazing at the discolored fortress like this? A strong wind suddenly blew over us, causing the trees to stir. My clothes fluttered. The unfamiliar sensation brought me back to my senses. I realized I had been standing here for quite a while.

What an oversight. I completely lost myself in this moment of reverie. This would've been fine had I been alone, but Mana was here with me. This had to be tedious for her. Not only that, she had kept me company out here many times now. I did something bad to her. As I reflected over this, I turned toward Mana—and realized I had enormously misunderstood.

Mana was standing right there, her eyes looking at the fortress with an endlessly earnest gaze. The slight smile on her small lips strengthened the fleeting impression her delicate and slender body already possessed. It was as if she could vanish at any moment. And yet, it was like her gaze was boring into the fortress, refusing to look away. She didn't show a single hint of boredom. She didn't even realize I was looking at her from the side. So, just maybe, she watched with more passion than I did. Just like me, her feelings were rushing toward the fortress—and consequently, to the person within.



In short, this was what I had misunderstood. I had completely misread the scale of Mana's feelings toward my master. Perhaps it was this very moment that allowed me to realize something.

At first, Mana was a target for surveillance. Then she became my friend. From the day I met her, we had shared our time together. That was why, if a day passed where I didn't see my master's face, then this also applied to her. Our conditions were identical, and our reactions were abnormally similar. In that case, did Mana also share this feeling I harbored in my chest?

Looking at it like that, I could actually understand a few things. There was a time when Lily and I were wary of Mana. When asked how she felt about this, Mana had replied, "I'm not angry." She had gone on to explain it was because "I sympathize with you servants."

Why would a human sympathize with servants rather than our master, her fellow human? Was it perhaps because she harbored the same feeling as us? Coming to this realization caused a certain seed within me to sprout. Or perhaps bursting like a firework would be a more appropriate expression. The time I had spent with this girl was the fuse, and now it had been ignited. My thoughts ran full speed toward the truth Mana had been hiding all this time.

"Mana."

I called my precious friend's name. She blinked several times, coming back to her senses, then turned toward me.

"Oh, sorry. I guess I zoned out a little. Shall we head back?" Mana said with a small smile, as if nothing was going on.

Her behavior showed no trace of the passion she had when she was gazing at the fortress just moments ago. The one before me was the usual Mana. Yes. The same as usual... So, just maybe, Mana felt that way this entire time?

What was going on? I couldn't help but feel shocked. Mana had been the one to teach me how important this feeling inside my heart was. If not for her, I would've put a lid on these feelings I bore toward my master, locking them away in the storehouse deep within my chest, neglecting it altogether. The reason I was able to dearly embrace these feelings now was all, in every

possible way, thanks to Mana.

And yet, Mana herself was making light of her own heart. She was acting as if it didn't exist. Could such a thing be allowed? And above all else, would it really be okay for me to pretend I didn't see this? Could I really call myself her friend if I did?

Mana began to walk back when she realized I wasn't following her. She turned around with a curious expression and asked, "What's the matter, Rose?"

"Mana. How do you feel about my master?"

She jolted.

Mana's face, which was usually so sparse in emotion, twitched as her neutral demeanor shattered into pieces.

Chapter 10: The Puppet's Friend *Rose's POV*

"Mana. How do you feel about my master?"

Mana's face twitched and then froze. My words must have touched upon an extremely sensitive part within her. Nobody had touched it before. Or maybe...she herself had no intention of allowing anyone to touch it. Here in this moment, I took a step toward the portion of herself that Mana kept hidden.

"...Let's not, okay? Nothing pleasant will come from this conversation."

Mana's reply was detached, at least on the surface. The fact that she managed to regain her usual expressionless demeanor was just as I would expect of her.

"Hey, Rose. Wasn't today lots of fun? Well, I guess some of it was pretty embarrassing for me, and I ended up hurting Gerbera... But it was a fun day, wasn't it? Ending it by talking about something weird will spoil the entire day. It'd be such a waste. So let's stop there, okay?"

"No. I won't stop."

I shook my head. It certainly had been fun. Even though we had made several blunders, we could look back and laugh at those as well. This was a fragment of our everyday lives. No matter how trivial a matter, it was a precious treasure which belonged only to us.

Just as she said, going further could possibly spoil the entire day, or maybe even send everything we had accumulated together tumbling down. What I was trying to do here was possibly equivalent to destroying our treasure.

Nevertheless, I couldn't stop this conversation. It might be dangerous, but I couldn't fear stepping forth. I was convinced of this. Mana's smile when she gazed at the fortress was just that fleeting, like it could vanish at any moment.

"I've had a doubt in my mind for quite some time now," I said, daring to step in. It was none other than Mana herself who gave me the strength to do so.

"My master was suspicious of you. And you know that for yourself. However,

you continued to support him.”

“...What’s there for you to doubt about that, Rose? I’ll apologize if I’ve offended you in some way.”

“Nonsense. There’s no need to apologize.” I shook my head. “I just wondered. With your abilities, you could’ve done things another way.”

All this time, I had been watching both my master and Mana. They were always on my mind. I wanted to understand them. I could take pride in the fact that nobody else devoted their thoughts to these two as much as I did. It was because of this that I harbored such doubts.

I recalled the night I had gone to my master to get permission to teach Mana about magic. Distrust and a lack of understanding had swirled within his heart. My master suffered from a severe distrust in humanity, stemming from his horrible experience when the Colony was destroyed. He might feel differently now, but at least up until that night, he had viewed Mana with abnormally distrustful eyes. But was my master’s trauma really the only cause for this? I couldn’t help but doubt this to be the case.

My master was suspicious of Mana. And knowing that, Mana had continued to support him. Back during the fight with the then-nameless Gerbera, Mana had not only drafted the plan, but she exposed her own life to danger. She had even taken the thankless role of helping Lily regain her composure. The reason she continued to help me understand my still inexperienced heart was obvious now that we were friends. But before that, her initial reasons for doing so were in no small part because I was my master’s servant.

She didn’t grumble a single complaint, nor did she get angry. She didn’t sulk. She had no strength in battle whatsoever. She earnestly continued searching for something she could do—without asking for a single thing in return.

It was only natural to doubt her reasons for acting as she did. I simply couldn’t understand her motives at the time. So, didn’t it make perfect sense to doubt her? Wasn’t it the obvious reaction to the question of why she would do such a thing? Also, she carried a deep sickness in her heart, much like my master did. Wouldn’t one suspect she was plotting for some hidden compensation? And if that compensation had to be kept hidden, then it must’ve been born of some

shady reason. Having misgivings about what exactly she was scheming wasn't all that strange.

To borrow Mana's own words, her behavior only showed the desire "to do something for someone." "Wanting to do something," and "wanting someone to do something for you" didn't exist here. Such desires were supposed to reveal one's humanlike qualities, yet I couldn't see any such humanity within Mana no matter how much I looked...

The mysterious thing here was how the situation was completely different with me. I had never really suspected Mana of anything like my master did, but when she had lent me her hand, she genuinely expressed her feelings. "I feel sympathy," "I'm grateful," "I want to be your friend." And yet she had never put in the effort to come to such a mutual understanding with my master. In a sense, it was like she was watering the sprouts of his suspicion.

And then there was the biggest problem. If I could notice this with my immature mind, then there was no way Mana didn't, considering her wisdom. In which case, I could only come to one conclusion.

"Mana, are you acting in a way to purposefully make my master suspicious of you?"

From my master's eyes, Mana definitely looked suspicious. At the very least, he didn't see the Katou Mana I knew. All he saw was the figure of a "monster," in a sense, hiding its scheming fangs.

I was starting to wonder whether this wasn't only because of the filter he looked through, where everything looked suspicious. It was precisely because Mana herself had been acting that way that my master continued to distrust her.

"Say you're right..." Mana didn't deny what I said and cocked her head to the side. "Why would I do such a thing?"

"I didn't know for myself until just now."

No one would know the answer to that, even if they had a deeper understanding of humans than I did. Who in the world would purposefully act in a way to invite distrust in themselves? In a sense, it was an act of self-harm.

There was no reason to do something so absurd. That was why I had convinced myself it was just my imagination, even though I found Mana's behavior until now to be rather strange.

"But after watching you moments ago, I figured it out. Mana..." I looked right into my friend's eyes from behind my mask. "You don't want my master to trust in humans."

Mana remained silent. Her eyes widened ever so slightly. Anyone else would've likely overlooked this. But that faint manifestation of emotion was more than enough for me to be fully convinced. And backed by my newfound conviction, I continued to press her.

"Trusting you would mean that my master decided he could once more put his trust in humans... I can't even imagine it. It's surely not as simple as it sounds. It might even be impossible for him to accomplish on his own. I wouldn't be much help, and Gerbera is the same in this regard. Ayame and Asarina don't even need mentioning. The only one who could support him in this is the one closest to his heart, Lily."

Having said that, my elder sister was somewhat indecisive about this problem in her own way. That was a different matter, though.

"It would be difficult for anyone to help my master restore his faith in humanity. However, if I were you, I think I'd be able to unshackle my master's heart from its fetters."

"...I really think you're overestimating me here." A genuine but bittersweet smile took shape on Mana's face.

"Is that so? I don't think I am, but it may be the case if you say so, Mana."

I couldn't deny her if she said so herself. But I couldn't believe that to be true either. Mana was an amazing girl. She had guided my inexperienced heart to its current state. I could believe in her. I did believe in her. That was more than enough for me to continue pushing.

"We can hypothesize all we want, but the reality is you've never once tried to dispel my master's misunderstanding, right?"

"...I can't deny that. But why does that make you think I don't want Majima-

senpai to trust in humans?”

“That’s...”

Mana’s question brought back the image of her earnest gaze I saw just moments ago. She had been staring at the fortress with the same amount of passion as I was, if not more. And if her heart harbored the same feelings as mine...

“That’s because you don’t want to leave my master’s side.”

The conversation returned to the very reason I brought this up in the first place. Mana wished to remain by my master’s side, just as I did. Everything made sense if that was the case. Unlike me, Mana’s relationship with my master had a deadline, after all.

“From the very beginning, my master said he would bring you along until he found somewhere safe to leave you. As he is now, he feels deeply indebted to you. No, even without that, he would never abandon you irresponsibly. He fully intends to take responsibility and search for a place you’ll be safe... But this is a very difficult thing to accomplish.”

“Difficult, you say?”

“Yes. Judging from his personality, there’s no way my master can leave you, whom he is greatly indebted to, with anyone he can’t trust. But on the other hand, he can’t trust humans. As such, there’s no place in the world where he can safely leave you. So long as my master doesn’t trust humans, that is...”

Regardless, he would continue to search, and one day, he would fulfill his responsibility in some form. I had no doubts about this. I knew full well this wasn’t something I had to worry about. Yes. There was nothing to worry about... But it was also true it would be difficult. And because of that, it would take that much longer to accomplish. This was where I found the motive behind Mana’s practically masochistic behavior.

“Even a time-limited relationship can be extended by pushing back the deadline. If dispelling my master’s suspicions and undoing his misunderstandings would bring the deadline closer, then I don’t believe you would dare to do so. And if that’s your motive, I can understand your baffling

behavior.”

However, the outcome of her actions was far too barren. Even I was pained by it. By making him continuously suspect her, Mana was able to stay by my master’s side. That did in fact allow their relationship to continue. But in exchange, their relationship would never deepen.

“You wish to remain near my master, even if he suspects you the entire time. That’s just how strong your feelings for him are. Isn’t that why you exhaust your strength for his sake without hoping for anything in return?”

This feeling of hers was perhaps something like a prayer. No matter what Mana did, there was a possibility my master would conquer his distrust of humans. If that were to happen, their time-limited relationship would come to an end. All that would be left was a girl who had been continuously distrusted. I couldn’t possibly remain silent and watch that unfold.

“Mana, I believe you harbor very strong feelings for my master. So, why do you make light of these feelings? Were you not the one to tell me not to kill my emotions?”

Even if she didn’t use such a roundabout method, she could still remain by his side. Mana was consciously choosing to take the most painful path, turning her back on her own happiness.

If she didn’t want to part with him, she could just tell him that. If she harbored some kind of special feelings for him, then she could just convey them to him. Unlike me, Mana knew what her emotions were, meaning she could express them at any time.

“I can somehow tell... Aren’t your feelings for him the same as mine?”

“You need to put in the effort to realize your dreams. Yours is one which can be fulfilled, after all.”

Mana’s own words came to mind. If my dream could be fulfilled, what exactly was a dream that couldn’t be fulfilled? She had told me I couldn’t give up. And yet who was the one actually giving up here? Why was it that she sympathized with us servants? Why did she always say that she was jealous? Even her plan to thrust unattainable happiness in front of the white arachne to crush her

heart seemed like it was a result of this self-tormenting behavior.

If so, the girl named Katou Mana was an endlessly tragic person. There was no way I could possibly let her be. Therefore...

“Mana, how do you feel about my master?” I asked her the same question once more.

Mana stared at me with a fixed gaze, as if she was probing my mind. I returned in kind. I had no intention of backing down here. And after a short while, she suddenly smiled.

“...I’m honestly surprised.”

It was a transparent smile with no shadow hanging over it. It felt so clear that just touching it would shatter it to pieces, yet it didn’t show a glimpse of what was within. It was a gentle smile, much like the one she made when gazing at the fortress... Why was that? It made my heart feel restless.

“You always lamented not being able to understand the subtleties of the heart and not being able to understand your master. I didn’t think you’d notice this quickly.”

“It’s not all that surprising, is it? I still have a long way to go.” I knew of my inadequacies better than anyone. “But you were the one who taught me everything regarding this, after all.”

“I see. You were able to realize precisely because it’s me. That makes me feel a little ticklish.”

Mana was my teacher. She was the closest person to me. That was why someone as inexperienced as me could see the truth within her. Besides, there was one other reason. Mana never tried to deceive me.

Toying with me by playing with her words would have been a trifle to her. It was her sincerity which prevented her from doing so. She wanted to face me properly as a friend. This assured me that I hadn’t made a mistake by becoming her friend. Because of that, I absolutely couldn’t leave her be.

Seeing me harden my resolve, Mana’s smile turned slightly bitter. “How do I feel about Majima-senpai, huh” she muttered, clasping her hands behind her

back and turning around on the spot. Once more, the fortress reflected in her eyes. “It’s not all that complicated. It’s actually pretty normal, almost expected.”

I couldn’t see whether or not she was smiling anymore. Now clad in a somewhat ephemeral air, Mana continued quietly.

“But you may not be able to understand it yet, Rose... You don’t understand what kind of emotions a girl harbors toward the boy who saved her from something beyond horrible...”

She would collapse if I touched her carelessly. She would vanish if I took my eyes off her. Mana’s already delicate and small body now had an ominous sense of transparency to it. And yet, I couldn’t say anything as I stood next to her.

Just as she said, I didn’t understand. I still couldn’t grasp this feeling within me. I couldn’t understand the feeling in Mana’s heart, even though it was the same as mine. I couldn’t say anything. I had no choice but to remain silent.

Mana turned back to me as I stood there quietly. “I have no intention of telling Majima-senpai my feelings.”

“...Why...?!”

“Because I don’t want to.”

Her tone was quiet, through and through. Her hushed voice conveyed her resignation. I couldn’t maintain my composure.

“Why?! You know it’s important! You taught me it is! So, why...?!”

“I mean, this is all I have.”

Mana’s smile, though faded, didn’t crumble. Seeing her puppet-like expression finally made me realize... The wound in her heart hadn’t healed in the least.

“I’m not a strong person. I could have easily died in the chaos the day the Colony fell. And yet I managed to survive thanks to Mizushima-senpai. Then, she died. And this time, I should’ve died in that hut. It was thanks to Majima-senpai that I didn’t... But by that time, pretty much everything inside me was already gone.”

She wasn't so strong that she could live through such a horrible experience, fall into despair, and still get back up on her feet. Or perhaps humans simply weren't made all that strong to begin with.

There were certainly cases where a disastrous experience would lead one to choose their own death. For those who continued to choose life, nobody could criticize them if they never recovered.

It was truly rare for a human to swallow such malice as if it were nourishment, stand back up firmly on their feet, and march forward even while burdened with unhealable wounds. If these heroes were able to laugh it off and forgive everything without feeling anything, they were simply monsters.

In that sense, Mana was ordinary. She was a commonplace girl, as delicate as any other. And that once weak and delicate girl who went by the name Katou Mana had died in that hut. She might have had a pulse. She might even have been breathing. Her skin had surely been warm. However, back then, she lost what was most precious to her. Her heart had died.

"Majima-senpai led you two in and saved me. It was the first time he seriously thought to kill someone. He was spurred on by Mizushima-senpai's death, the malice that had caused her demise, and the irrationality which infects this world... So much happened to him. Too much, even. I'm sure Senpai's heart was frozen solid at the time. And yet, the first thing he did was check on me. He entered the hut and walked straight toward me. At that time, I felt like I touched his heart."

Mana's pigtails swayed as she shook her head.

"That was, of course, a delusion. I know. I'm human. I'm not connected to him by his mental path. I guess this probably sounds a little insensitive of me, since you're his servant... But I didn't care even if it was a delusion. I lost absolutely everything. I was hollow, empty. It was the one and only warmth I could cling to."

She put her hand to her chest. It was as if she was trying to remember the sensation she had once experienced.

"In the instant I met him, something filled that cavity within me. I didn't know what it was at first, but I felt like I had to go with him. I only realized what this

was on that night Gerbera attacked us. After I did, I had to act. That's how I ended up as I am today."

After being trampled down, reduced to tatters, with everything inside her dying once already, all that was left was for her physical body to follow the rest of her into death. But a certain emotion toward the boy who saved her had welled up within this once empty girl. It became her driving force. It allowed her to move what had once stopped functioning.

In a sense, this was very similar to us servants. The only difference was that we didn't have anything to begin with, whereas she had lost everything. Mana lost everything except for that single emotion. And with nothing in her possession, she had nothing to lose. That was why Mana was strong now. So strong she could bring down Lily's heart. So strong she could stand before Gerbera when she was our enemy without showing a single hint of fear.

She had already died. Hence, there was nothing to fear. She was just a moving corpse. Even if her body stopped, it wouldn't change anything. She had no regrets. No fixations. There wasn't a single thing in this world keeping her soul here. She didn't hesitate in the face of fear, and she didn't even flinch as death brushed by her. She simply pushed forward toward her goal. So, right now, that made her a monster.

Using that single emotion within her as fuel, she was nothing more than a living corpse walking toward her goal. That was the true identity of the monster known as Katou Mana.

"If my feelings for Majima-senpai vanish, I'll return to being a corpse. If I told him, and he rejected me, it would be the end."

"Is that why you refuse to tell him? Is that really all right with you...?"

"It doesn't matter. This is the ideal result, isn't it?" Mana was perfectly serious. "Majima-senpai surmounted the greatest crisis possible in the white arachne's attack. Lily has already conquered her unreliable nature. You've accepted Gerbera. All that's left is for you to convey your feelings to him. You won't even really need my help to accomplish that anymore. Even if I'm gone, you'll all be fine. Your heart has grown more than I thought it would, Rose. It may take some time, but you'll do well all on your own."

“Mana... Are you...?”

The transparent smile Mana directed at me made me tremble. I knew she was searching for things she could do. What she had already done for my master and us servants didn't even need to be mentioned. Her sudden interest in learning healing magic was also linked to this. Everything she had done up until now, no matter how small a thing it was, was all done as a result of her desperately racking her mind to find something she could do for us, even though she possessed next to no power here in this world. But what if she lost everything? It was still fine while she was moving toward her goal. But what if that goal was gone?

I looked at Mana's smile and truly felt like she could vanish at any moment. My instincts were correct. The smile before my eyes right now was the smile of one who accepted she could vanish. Mana desired to disappear with her one and only emotion still intact within her heart. Unveiling that feeling to my master and losing such a special emotion was unacceptable to her.

As such, Mana could already see “the end.” That was why her smile was so fleeting when she looked at the fortress my master was staying in.

“It's okay, Rose. There's nothing for you to worry about. I'm sure everyone will be fine,” she said in a considerate voice, sensing the unrest within me.

But in contrast to her words, Mana herself wasn't part of her considerations. When she said “everyone,” she didn't include herself. That future was far too difficult for me to accept...

“Everyone will obtain happiness, and Majima-senpai and all who surround him will have a happy ending. So...”

“Please don't say such foolish nonsense!”

Before I knew it, I cut her off with a loud voice.

“Rose...?”

Mana looked at me with a blank gaze.

Aah, her lack of understanding is really aggravating. The fact that she couldn't understand my anger here was an embodiment of the distortion in her heart.

She had broken down a long time ago already. Despite being so sharp about the subtleties of others, her own heart was nothing more than a scrapyard. It was far too ironic.

“Please stop saying such foolish nonsense. Everyone will obtain happiness? There’s no way that’s true, is it? You’re not a part of that, after all.”

“...Aah. You really are kind, Rose,” she said with a bitter smile. “But you don’t need to worry about me. I’m human. I’m not Senpai’s servant. I’m nothing more than a minor role in the story of Majima-senpai and his servants. Besides, I was pretty much dead already. Hoping for happiness now is nothing more than an unfulfillable dream.”

My words didn’t reach her. It was practically hopeless. What was I supposed to do?

“You can’t kill your own emotions.”

“Don’t give up.”

“Your dream is one which can be fulfilled.”

I couldn’t repeat any of the words Mana had told me before. I didn’t have the strength to say them. Mana knew her own emotions, and since I couldn’t understand what this feeling I harbored toward my master was, I couldn’t overthrow her determination. No matter how much anyone told her to be happy, there was no way those words would reach her if she didn’t recognize the value of such happiness herself.

So... So, what? What do I do? What can I do? Do I just give up, shut my mouth, and accept Mana’s excuse? Do I stand by as she eventually vanishes and live on happily with my master?

There was no way I could possibly accept such a thing. I had to reach her somehow or other. I was convinced. Mana was wrong. She was making a hopelessly fatal mistake. But she didn’t even realize she was making a mistake. It wasn’t like her at all. Even though she smiled as if she understood, she didn’t get it. That only stood to reason. Even if she had already accepted her own death, there was no way she understood everything in the world.

Even my master worried over his own immaturity, and Mana was a year

younger than him. She knew more than I did, but there were things she didn't know. There were things I knew of that she didn't.

I had to get it across to her...but how was I supposed to do that? My heart was screaming, "Your way is wrong!" And yet I couldn't build an argument for it. I couldn't convey my feelings to her.

It was vexing. Frustrating. My own worthlessness sent shivers down my body. I thought I had grown up a little, yet was I really unable to save my one and only friend? Why weren't we connected by the mental path? If we were, Mana wouldn't have tormented herself to this point...

"Mana, I..."

Nevertheless, I had to do something to reach her. I obstinately started to weave my words, but I wasn't able to tell her anything. It wasn't because I failed. It definitely wasn't because I gave up. I simply lost my chance to do so.



"Huh?"

I heard a faint noise. It resounded from far away and was drawing closer. It was quiet at first, but it gradually grew louder and louder as it began to mix with sounds of destruction.

"Tremors?"

Something was running down the side of the hill toward this cliff. It was rapidly getting closer, and whatever it was, there were a lot of them. Danger was approaching. I had to take Mana and get—

I won't make it. They're too fast...!

"Th-This is...?!"

Sheer mass and momentum trampled down anything in its path, smashing thickets to pieces and sending leaves flying up into the air. A giant green caterpillar appeared before us. It was a monster we had encountered in this area after heading north from the arachne nest, a bull wriggler. Its primary means of attack was using its giant body as a powerful ram, relying on its tenacious vitality as a weapon.

Frankly speaking, it wasn't much of an enemy. I'm a rare monster. After I became my master's servant, I defeated dozens of monsters and accumulated combat experience to match that. Even if I was a step or two behind in combat ability compared to the likes of Gerbera and Lily, I could still defeat a bull wriggler in a one-on-one fight.

There wasn't just one of them, however. It was rather strange, but not impossible. Once in a while, so long as they were the same species of creature, monsters would sometimes form a group and act in concert, even if they weren't like firefangs who typically worked in packs. That was why it wasn't their unity itself that shook me; it was the sheer number of them.

"S-So many...?!"

There were enough bull wrigglers to completely flood my vision. Some were slipping through the trees, some just trampled them down, but they were all charging down the hillside. There were nearly a hundred of them. It made me wonder if all the bull wrigglers in this entire region had massed together. It was clearly unusual. What could've caused this...? Now wasn't the time to be thinking of such things, though.

A portion of the bull wrigglers charging down the slope was headed toward the cliff we were standing on. The sound of their mandibles chittering grew closer. In no time at all, those compound eyes, three on each side of their heads, closed in on us...

"Mana!"

"Eep!"

I grabbed Mana and jumped. A bull wriggler plowed through the spot she had just been occupying and tumbled off the cliff. I managed to get out of the way, but I didn't have time to feel relieved. The ledge clinging to the side of this cliff was narrow, and there were more charging bull wrigglers heading right toward where we were about to land.

"Hyah!"

It was far too risky to collide with them with Mana still in my arms. Thus, I threw the battleaxe in my hand at the large caterpillar. Bull wrigglers were

tenacious. It would be difficult to kill one with a single thrown weapon. Still, it could at least stop one in its tracks if the blow was hardy enough.

The axe crashed into the monster. The black magic blade sank into the caterpillar's green shell. It crushed the three compound eyes on one side of its head as its sturdy shell snapped apart. A weighty and ominous sound resounded in the air as the axe buried itself into the monster's meaty cranium.

It was a critical hit, far more than I could hope for...and yet its charge didn't stop. It didn't even flinch. The bull wriggler was still coming for us.

"No way...?!"

No damage at all?! That's impossible! Its head was split clean in two. Even if it didn't die on the spot because of its vitality as an insect, there was no way it could keep moving without stopping for even a single instant. How could such a thing—

"Ugh! You damn bug!"

I didn't have time to intercept it with the spare axe on my back. I also couldn't dodge it, seeing that I was still in midair from avoiding the last caterpillar. My only choice was to endure. I turned the round shield on my arm toward the incoming caterpillar, holding Mana in both arms as my feet finally landed on the ground. I supported her head and shoulders as I stuck out my left side and braced for impact.

"G-Gah?!"

A terrifying shock assaulted my wooden body. My feet just barely managed to gain traction, carving their way through the ground. To think I was forced to take a direct hit from a power-type monster of all things. My joints were screaming. At this rate, some part of my body was sure to break. But even though I knew that, I couldn't leap back to escape the impact. All that was behind me was a sheer cliff.

"Ugh, hnngh...!"

Unable to withstand anymore, my feet began to slip. I dug my toes into the ground like a rake, but they couldn't endure the force and several of them snapped off.

“Guh...”

I managed to stop the charge right on the very brink. One more step back and we would’ve tumbled down this cliff.

“Somehow, we’re...”

I felt a small sense of relief. My entire body was creaking, but I withstood its charge. With that attack negated, a bull wriggler was nothing to fear. All that was left was to lower Mana to the ground and then my hands would be free.

“Rose! Not yet!”

“Wha—?!”

Mana screamed, and just a moment later, I realized the situation we were in. A giant shadow circled around the body of the bull wriggler, appearing right before me. It was a giant beast-type monster. Its fiendish red eyes looked down at me from its rabbit-shaped head while its bear-shaped body prepared to strike. This was a rough rabbit. Unlike the bull wriggler, the rough rabbit had closed in with agile movements and was already taking a swing with one of its thick arms.

Why are a bull wriggler and a rough rabbit in the same place...? That question was smashed to bits by the thick arm coming down at me.



My memories of what happened weren’t clear. I had been solely focused on moving my body. Before I knew it, I was clinging to the side of the cliff, about halfway down to the bottom.

“...Ma...na...”

The first thing that came to mind was my precious friend Mana.

Mana... Where’s Mana...? Good. She’s still in my arms. She was looking up at me, her face pale. The scratch on her cheek looked painful, but she didn’t appear to be badly injured.

“Are you...hurt...Mana?”

Nevertheless, I had to be sure. I couldn’t leave anything to chance. Lily, the

only one among us who could use healing magic, wasn't here. I couldn't afford to let Mana get badly injured.

"Rose! Rose!"

A crying voice answered my question. Mana's cute features were stained with tears. I cocked my head ever so slightly, wondering what could've happened to make her cry. And with a clunk, my left eyeball tumbled out of its socket. The fabricated eye bounced about and fell down the cliff, vanishing into the distance.

"...Oh."

Now I remembered. I had been struck right in the face by the rough rabbit. The blow wasn't fatal, and I couldn't sense the monster anywhere nearby. Perhaps it was under the impression we had died from the fall.

The mask I had been wearing was now smashed to pieces. Judging by how my eyeball just fell out, the face I had put so much effort into was already cruelly damaged. Having said that, it was just decorative, so losing an eyeball didn't affect my combat capabilities.

In any case, I had to get a grasp of my own condition. I carefully pressed myself against the steep cliff and touched my face with my empty hand.

But nothing actually touched my face.

My left hand was completely missing from the wrist down.

My memory came rushing back. The hit from the rough rabbit sent me tumbling down the cliffside with Mana still in my arms. As I fell at full speed, all I could focus on was the danger to Mana's life. I had stabbed my left hand into the cliff on the spur of the moment, but because we had already built up a significant amount of speed, the rock just filed down my hand from my fingertips all the way to my wrist.

It hadn't been a pleasant experience to have my hand shaved off like that, but it wasn't as bad as losing my life. All I had to do now was desperately cling to the cliffside. It was actually quite fortunate I had somehow managed to kill our momentum.

I had held up my knee during the fall so that Mana wouldn't hit the side of the cliff. There was a fair bit of damage there too. The clothes I had borrowed from Lily were also torn here and there. My feet dug into the cliffside, keeping us from falling, but I couldn't feel any of my toes.

Having finished my self-examination, I turned to look at Mana. "So, Mana. Let me ask you once more, are you hurt anywhere?"

"Forget about me!" Mana uncharacteristically screamed as she stretched her hand out to my face. She pressed her palm against it as if covering the broken left half. "What about you?! Are you okay?! There's so much damage... Your entire body is a mess!"

"I don't really mind."

"There's no way you don't!"

"I don't. I mean, you're safe and sound, Mana."

Mana's eyebrows rose considerably. It was an extremely rare display of her anger.

"What are you saying?! Please have more concern for yourself!"

"I do," I replied immediately.

Mana's lips were trembling. She was at a loss for words. She could tell I wasn't just answering her noncommittally. A faint sense of bewilderment ran across her dirtied face.

"I'm properly caring for myself," I said to her. "I'm not making light of myself. You taught me this, Mana. My master also told me the same thing."

It didn't really need to be said after all this time. I wasn't particularly smart, but I felt like I couldn't possibly be that stupid. Even I had grown up somewhat.

"But it can't really be helped, right? I think of my master as more important than myself, even after I learned to treat myself dearly... And I think of you in the same way, Mana."

"M-Me...?"

Mana was clearly dismayed. Her eyes shot wide open as if she couldn't

believe it. This was perfectly understandable. There was a time I thought I'd never meet another human who I could speak of on the same level as my master. But now I was different.

I nodded in affirmation. "Yes. So please don't die, Mana."

I finally realized what I needed to convey to this girl who had given up on everything. I didn't regret becoming a total mess as a result of desperately trying to protect her. By doing so, I was able to once more realize what was important to me, and just how precious it was.

"Please stop saying 'someone like me.' Please don't disappear on me. I need you, Mana."

"R-Rose...?"

"Didn't you just say that the day we spent together was fun? Didn't you truly enjoy yourself talking with my master? I was really happy to see you like that, Mana. Really, really happy. So please..."

I stopped thinking about the minor details. I stopped thinking about how to convey my feelings to her. If doing such things made me hold my tongue, then logic and reason were meaningless. I decided to simply voice all of these feelings within my heart. It would be fine. Mana would surely understand. I believed so. Thus, I spoke.

"Please live. Please be happy. There's no way my story can have a happy ending if you don't get one as well, now is there?"

"Well..."

Mana looked utterly astonished. She had just realized her own miscalculation.

In truth, Mana had failed. She didn't find any value in her own happiness. She merely kept walking, keeping her feelings for my master to herself without sparing a single glance toward her own happiness. Just walking and walking. She had perfected this way of life to the point that I could do nothing about it up until now.

On the other hand, she genuinely valued the happiness of everyone other than herself. If not, she wouldn't have helped me so sincerely in trying to grant

my wish. Mana had thrown away her own happiness, yet she couldn't disregard mine. It was like she was denying her very own efforts in doing so.

Above all else, however, her heart was unable to make light of others by nature. Thus, seeing as I couldn't establish my own happiness without her, she couldn't ignore me. In other words, Mana had lost the opportunity to give up on her own happiness.

"U-Uh..."

The ephemeral atmosphere that had wrapped around Mana all this time vanished. That feeling like she could disappear at any moment was no longer there. She was right here. She was definitely in my arms looking up at me.

"B-But, that can't...that can't be..." Her objection was awkward and hesitant. So much so that one would never expect it was coming from Mana. "Your happiness...has nothing to do..."

"I'll get angry if you say it has nothing to do with you, Mana."

She trembled with a start. She was like a small, frightened child. So, I spoke to her in as gentle a tone as I could.

"Weren't you the one to say you wanted to be friends?"

"...Ah."

This was the one mistake Mana had made. I didn't think myself so cruel and heartless that I could know of my friend's tragic intentions and go on to be happy all on my own. If she truly wished to quietly disappear, she should never have become my friend. It was a massive failure that she could no longer take back. I wouldn't let her take it back.

"Please don't say something so sad like you have nothing left other than your feelings for my master."

If Mana truly had nothing, then she was a monster. And if so, then just by becoming my friend, she was no longer a monster. She was just a girl. She was my precious friend. And seeing that she wasn't a monster, my words could reach her.

"Please let me pray for my friend's fortune. Please show me your own

happiness. I don't want a happy ending where you're not there with me, Mana."

I tried to wipe away the tears flowing from her eyes, but then I noticed I didn't actually have a hand to do so. After thinking it over a bit, I used the hand I was carrying her with to push her face against my body. Tears began staining the clothes on my chest. I could feel the slightest shuddering against me.

"Rose, I-I'm..."

She couldn't say anymore. This was likely the first time since we met that she returned to being a normal girl and cried. She was crying into my chest. Her hands wrapped around my back and tightly clung to me. She simply sobbed in silence. As her friend, I wanted to let her cry to her heart's content. The situation didn't seem to want to let that happen, though.

"How boorish," I muttered.

"Rose...?"

Mana raised her head. Her expression was innocent, her reddened eyes looking right at me.

"Sorry, Mana. Could you lean against me and hang on so that you don't fall off? I only have one hand right now."

Mana nodded and wrapped her arms around my neck. I grabbed the spare axe with my now free right hand. My eyes were fixed on a viscous liquid sliding down the steep cliff.

"This time it's a slime...? No, there's even more?"

My focus shifted away from the cliff, where I spotted multiple shadows running down the hillsides adjacent to us. There were my fellow magical puppets. Gray wolves, firefangs, joined the fray. There were squirming trees, treants, and giant beetles armed with lances, stab beetles. They were all running down the mountain at their own speed. There were also monsters we had never seen before, like large insects armed with two scythes, humanlike shadows composed only of an upper body, and dogs with heads as large as their bodies. The majority were bull wrigglers, but there were dozens of other monsters. Put together, there were hundreds of them. It was clearly abnormal.

“Why are so many different species of monsters working together...?” Mana asked, also realizing the situation we found ourselves in. She gulped as she clung to my neck.

Just as she said, it was pretty much unprecedented for multiple species of monsters to appear at once. It wasn’t guaranteed that monsters would clash when they encountered each other, but fundamentally, monsters of different species didn’t flock together.

“Not only that, there are monsters you don’t see in this area,” I commented.

Including the rough rabbit who attacked us, there were multiple monsters here who didn’t actually inhabit the region. The situation was getting even more bizarre. I wanted to figure out what was happening as much as I could, but...

I immediately brought my thoughts to an end and left it for later.

“Mana. I also find this strange. But first, we must overcome the danger before us.”

“Yeah... You’re right.”

The slime oozing down the cliff was slowly and surely closing in on us. Normally, I wouldn’t think much of such an enemy, but right now I was halfway up a precipitous cliff. I couldn’t move properly. Any major movement could shake Mana off.

“This is quite serious. What do you plan on doing, Rose?”

“It’s basically sink or swim, but I’m thinking of throwing my axe.”

“That’s what I thought you’d say, but I think you’re better off not doing that. Considering the angle, that slime will end up falling on us if you do.”

“So...shall we try slowly descending while buying time?”

Fortunately, the angle of the cliff wasn’t so steep. I could manage if I was careful. The problem was whether or not the slime would catch up to us...

“It’s better to take action than waste time thinking it over,” I said. “If it becomes necessary, then I can intercept it. If we go down far enough, we might be able to leap off to the bottom.”

“I think that’s a good idea.”

“It’s a bit irritating just having one hand for this.”

It was a hindrance in both descending the cliff and intercepting the slime. But I couldn’t do anything about my current condition. We would need to come up with some sort of countermeasure if we somehow managed to overcome this.

“Considering the situation, I should’ve prepared some form of long-range attack. I suppose I should also carry around some spare parts for my arms and legs at all times. But if I do so, there’ll be too much luggage to—”

“Rose.”

As I began descending the cliff as quickly as possible while keeping my attention on the slime, Mana called my name.

“What is it, Mana?”

“Please protect me, okay?”

“...!”

It was clear her words referred to more than just this situation. It was a sign of change in this girl who had accepted she would disappear one day.

I gave one big nod. “Of course. With all certainty.”

I would prove that I could definitely protect this small, dainty, and delicate friend of mine. No matter what. I firmly swore to myself that I would, when suddenly, a white shadow appeared.

It seems I won’t have to do anything, this time at least.

“Please be careful, Mana. She’s coming.”

“Huh? Wah? Eek?!”

I stopped our descent and once more held onto Mana. In the next instant, a white bullet slammed into the cliff. The slime, which was in the center of the impact zone, burst apart into smithereens. A great tremor ran down the cliff as I hung on tightly with Mana in my arms. Small pebbles rained down on us incessantly, accompanied by the drizzling sticky fluid from the ruptured slime.

“Are you alright, Rose?”

The cloud of dust cleared, revealing an enormous white spider. The way she gripped the cliff's side with her eight legs gave her a great advantage on this terrain. Even without that, there weren't many out there who could hope to match her.

Upon spotting me, Gerbera's well-shaped eyebrows knitted together.



“It seems you’ve had a rough time of it. That was quite the dangerous situation you were in.”

“Almost falling from the shockwave just now was the most dangerous part, just so you know.”

“That wouldn’t have been a problem. I was already prepared to catch you.”

This was likely true, considering her specialty in manipulating threads. Her more unfortunate aspects were quite prominent in our everyday lives, but when it came to combat, there was nobody more reliable than her in the world.

“You have my thanks, Gerbera. You really saved us.”

“It was nothing. I shall pull you to the top now.”

Gerbera climbed down to us and firmly affixed us to her threads. I kept hold of Mana and walked up the cliff as Gerbera pulled us up.

“In any case, this is a rather peculiar situation. This riffraff even surged all the way over to where I was.”

It seemed Gerbera had also encountered this large army of monsters. It was peculiar. Even she, who had lived far longer than I, had no idea what was going.

“Are you alright, Gerbera?”

“There’s no need for you to ask. I crushed all who came at me. I had no choice but to neglect those I couldn’t reach, though. They seem practically endless... Besides, you two had me worried. When I found you hanging halfway down the cliff, I thought my heart would...”

Gerbera suddenly stopped talking just as we reached the top.

“Gerbera? Is something wrong?”

I pulled my body up onto the cliff together with Mana and looked up at Gerbera’s beautiful face. Her red eyes were wide with surprise. Whatever she was looking at left her speechless. I turned to look in the same direction...and was left equally silent.

“The fortress...”

Mana’s dumbfounded voice resounded in the air. The enormous fortress

found itself in the center of hundreds of monsters swarming around it like insects.

Extra Story: The Loving Dead *Katou Mana's POV*

Up and down. Up and down. I shook about. The oscillation brought me assurance, like a baby rocking in its mother's arms. It made me feel somewhat ticklish, and a small smile spread on my face.

"Are you alright, Katou?" Rose asked as she turned to look at me.

"Yes."

Rose was carrying me as we proceeded through the forest. The only ones with me were Gerbera and Rose. Gerbera was carrying pretty much all of our luggage. Rose's only luggage was me.

How pathetic. I shouldn't have been here, but right before contacting the group made up of locals and students together with Majima-senpai and Lily, I thoughtlessly collapsed. It happened only moments ago. I couldn't do anything about the physical backlash. My condition was at its worst. I likely wouldn't be able to walk for the rest of the day. Honestly speaking, it was still a little painful.

Having said that, after resting for several hours under Rose's attentive gaze, I had somehow managed to recover from my shameful state. While I was resting, Gerbera had gone to confirm where Majima-senpai went.

The soldier wearing a white helmet who had detected us was a bit of a problem, but fortunately, Gerbera was connected to Majima-senpai by their mental path. She could tell where the other party was, so she was able to make chase while remaining out of visible range.

According to her, there was an enormous stone structure in the middle of this dense forest. The people we encountered had guided Majima-senpai and Lily there. Gerbera didn't really get it, but it was probably a fortress constructed by humans. Seeing that it was inside this dangerous forest, its defenses were probably flawless.

If something were to happen to Majima-senpai, Rose and Gerbera would have to charge in. But those girls didn't know the purpose of a fortress, so it was my

role to explain what it was and warn them of the dangers. Although, that would only happen after we managed to settle down somewhere.

As I thought of such things, I rode on Rose's back as we proceeded steadily through the forest. This wasn't the first time she'd given me a piggyback ride like this. Walking in a forest devoid of any human tampering was far more painful than I could possibly imagine. I was nothing more than a girl brought up in Japan, where pretty much all the roads were paved asphalt. Rose often helped me like this so that my weak body didn't slow down their progress.

Fortunately, because Gerbera was in the lead, I didn't have to worry about holding Rose back. No matter what monster attacked us, Gerbera could handle them on her own.

"Be careful, Rose. The ground over there has become rather brittle."

"Understood."

Rose kept walking even as Gerbera warned of the dangers every now and then. Her puppet feet trod through the soft earth. The way she dragged along was similar to a plow reclaiming ground. The scent of greenery saturated my nose, but I could sense the vitality of the soil. It was the smell of life, of the fallen leaves and broken branches returning to the earth.

This was a forest filled with death because of the rampant monsters, yet it was also choking with life. It made me feel like the trivial life of a single human would only get crushed beneath it all. It made me wonder why I was even alive. It was a mysterious sensation.

It didn't really need to be said that this was due to a chance meeting. Lily had saved Majima-senpai, and in turn he saved me. Ever since then, he always protected me. There were even a few occasions where I helped him. I could tell he was fretting over being unable to repay me for such.

I don't need anything like that, so I thought. My very existence here continued because of him. Not just my life, but even my heart. That was why it was perfectly natural to devote everything I had to him. Doing so was more than enough. I didn't need recompense. I never desired such a thing in the first place.

And precisely because I was like that, I didn't fear anything. There was only one thing I feared losing within me: this one precious emotion in my heart. I knew I was broken. At this rate, I would certainly die somewhere with ease. That happened when one's sense of fear didn't work properly. I would simply become a corpse, clinging to this one and only emotion I had acquired in that hut, without gaining anything else.

But that's fine, so I thought. In truth, I wouldn't have been able to stand before the white arachne's colossal bloodlust if this wasn't the case. My peculiarity ended up becoming useful to him.

I was already something like a corpse, anyway. A walking corpse. The living dead. When the time came, something which began moving by accident would simply stop once more. That was all I thought of myself...

"Katou," Rose called to me, pulling me out of my thoughts. "Please tell me if this is too hard on you."

Oops. I ended up worrying her for no reason because I didn't reply fast enough.

"Oh. No. I'm okay."

I shook my head at the featureless face right in front of me. I was grateful she worried about me, but on the other hand, I also felt guilty. Rose treated me far more dearly than I did myself. I was her very first friend, after all.

If I were to die one day, Rose would undoubtedly grieve. That sent a squeezing sensation through my chest, despite my supposedly unfeeling and empty heart. Why did I ask Rose to be my friend? I couldn't understand what I was thinking back then.

I could've helped Rose without becoming her friend. And yet I did, despite knowing full well it would cause her sorrow in the not so distant future. Was my head malfunctioning that badly? That stood to reason. Her words had been so impulsive. I spoke before I even knew it. I had been careless. I had a weak body; all I was capable of was thinking. And yet I couldn't think it over properly at the time. I just said what came to mind. Something was wrong with me back then. One could even call it a suicidal act.

A suicidal act... A suicidal act? That phrase didn't really fit someone who was pretty much as good as dead. It brought my thoughts to a halt. There was no point thinking over something that had already passed.

I was already Rose's friend now. I couldn't take it back. I really liked Rose, and I really, really hated the idea of causing her sorrow because of my blunder, but I couldn't do anything about it anymore.

So I thought.

I still didn't know anything at the time.

I didn't know how two negatives made a positive.

I didn't know what a suicidal act really meant for someone who was already dead.

I didn't know how wonderful a girl Rose was, far surpassing my expectations.

I knew nothing. And within that fog of resignation, I kept walking on, a corpse in love.

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Monster Tamer 3



MAJIMA

2ND YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT



LILY

MIMIC SLIME



KEI

ELF



SHIRAN

3RD COMPANY OF THE ALLIANCE KNIGHTS LIEUTENANT

"I cannot
comply with
such a
request,
sir."

"Um... Lieutenant
Shiran, could you
relax a bit?"



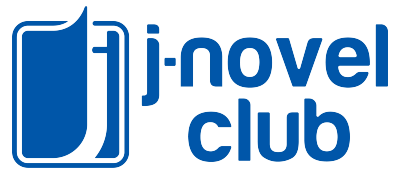












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Monster Tamer: Volume 3

by Minto Higure

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